

LAUREL OF STONYSTREAM

FAITH BALDWIN



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LAUREL OF STONYSTREAM

LAUREL OF STONYSTREAM

BY

ms FAITH BALDWIN

Cuthrell

Author of "Mavis of Green Hill"



BOSTON

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HUGH
HIS BOOK

YOUNG LOVE

*Young Love rides gaily as some slender Knight
Mounted on Moon-rays, spurred with Dreams;
shod, frail,
With fairy Fancy; armored in Delight;
His Sword a Song, his laughing Eyes alight
With splendid Sunshine—and ahead, the Grail!*

*The World's a Toy his spendthrift Smile may buy
And Spring's a Girl with lips of red Allure;
Like rosy Spears the Peach trees stab the Sky,
Age is a Myth and Death a Madman's lie,
And Life a Flame of Truth which must endure.*

*Godspeed, Young Love! A firm Hand on the Rein!
And long enchanted Journeys, for Day flies;
And Wisdom waits, with muted Mouth and vain,
Dark warning in her disregarded Eyes!*

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	WE SET THE SCENE	I
II	ON THE DECORATIVE QUALITIES OF STAINED GLASS	15
III	LAUREL WRITES A LETTER AND ELAINE RECEIVES ONE	26
IV	IN WHICH ROBIN IS CONFIDENTIAL AND JERRY MEETS THE FLAPPER	38
V	THE HERMIT OF WINDING RIVER . . .	53
VI	ROBIN WAITS NO LONGER, AND JERRY GIVES A PARTY	64
VII	DIAMONDS AND PEARLS	79
VIII	ELAINE GOES GOLFING	90
IX	FLAPPER TRIUMPHANT	108
X	ELAINE DEFEATED	122
XI	ROBIN BUILDS A FIRE	135
XII	JOHN WYNNE'S STORY	151
XIII	"NEWS IN BRIEF"	168
XIV	INTERLUDE AND AUNT SAMANTHA . .	175
XV	ELAINE'S GREAT ADVENTURE	191
XVI	LAUREL MAKES A FRIEND	201
XVII	SETTLING DOWN	216
XVIII	JANE ARRIVES	232
XIX	ENTER MR. DANGERFIELD	243

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
XX	HOLIDAYS	256
XXI	EXIT THE FLAPPER	266
XXII	UNDERCURRENTS	274
XXIII	WHAT ROBIN WROTE	293
XXIV	CONSULTATIONS	303
XXV	SURRENDER	315
XXVI	SPRING	326

LAUREL OF STONYSTREAM

Laurel of Stonystream

CHAPTER I

WE SET THE SCENE

*Within these silent walls the years have trod;
A century of chance and change and tears,
A century of seeking after God,
Of dreams and hopes, of long despairs and fears.
Birth has been here, and death, which follows after,
And love has reigned, and children's faery laughter.*

Some ninety miles from Manhattan Island the demure, white settlement of Stonystream clings to the round-buxomed Connecticut hills and watches, with drowsy indifference, the little years go by. In summer, Stonystream is gay with youth and laughter; youth and laughter go sweated and white flanneled to the tennis courts and links; youth and laughter dance in tulle frocks and dinner coats on the wide veranda of the Inn, under round moons and friendly stars; and day and night the narrow, lovely river ripples under the canoes and row boats which explore its many windings and secret shaded places. In winter, with its five hundred and something "natives" and "all-year-rounders," Stonystream points three white steeples to the frosty sky and

sends its children in scarlet tam-o'-shanters to the yellow schoolhouse, figuring out, meanwhile, new ways to entice the lucrative, if inexplicable, summer visitor to its quiet doorstep.

In winter the aristocratic street is Maple Avenue. In summer the fashionable world centres about the Inn, the Country Club, and Hillcrest, that wide green slope where the tired New Yorkers have builded frame and stucco, brick and "log" retreats. Every style of architecture is here; Georgian and Californian; Adirondack camp and glorified New England lean-to; early General Grant and late Italian Villa. Stonystream is proud of its summer residences; its home-heart is in Maple Avenue, as its business-heart is in Main Street.

Maple Avenue then, late in May.

On the corner of Maple and McKinley stands the white frame house which the grandfather of George Adams, its present owner, himself a George, erected. The Adams house was built for children's children and their children's children. Southern Colonial in type, the house has gracious pillars, two stories high, wide verandas, and hospitable doors. No flimsy carpentry is here, no inferior lumber. Bannisters are solid mahogany, window frames do not rattle, floors and ceilings are dependable affairs. The son of the builder installed bathrooms, the grandson, electric lights and a Victrola. And the natives of Stonystream point proudly to Adams House when they drive by with the summer visitor.

Adams House has wide green lawns and a garden

—several gardens, kitchen, fruit and flower. Adams House has, too, a daughter who, by the looks of her, might have grown in that garden, to the envy of the roses. Her mother, to whom Tennyson had made a secret appeal in High School, named her Elaine some one and twenty years before our story opens, and the years had not put Mrs. Adams to blush for that one excursion into the romantic. Elaine Adams was beautifully named. And, finding her on the veranda of Adams House this late May afternoon, the story very naturally commences.

The four o'clock sun, pointing an inquisitive golden finger, allowed himself liberties with hair as warmly golden, and a fair, creamy skin. Elaine Adams, waking from the pinkest, prettiest, most becoming nap in the world, stirred among the blue pillows of the swing and reached a beautiful arm to the floor for the book which had sent her to sleep. Then she sat up, frankly yawned and looked about her. The house was quiet, but dim sounds from the kitchen wing reached her—Mother at her cake making. Elaine looked at her watch. Two hours and more to train time. Where, she wondered, was Laurel?

She came to her feet in one wonderful, lazy movement. Taller than most girls, roundly slender, white and gold, she stood for a moment, her blue eyes, the eyes of an Ice Maiden, searching the lawn, the drowsy street, and finally, indifferently, chancing on the house next door. A quick gleam of interest darkened them and she walked to the end of the

veranda the better to view the unusual activities going on across the lawn and hedge which separated Adams House from its long-closed and shuttered neighbor.

"Laurel!" called Elaine. "Laurel!"

There was a faint answer from the direction of the garden. Elaine, returning to her couch but not to her nap, lay quiet and reflective.

"You called me, Elaine?"

This was Laurel at the side steps, Laurel in overalls, with much fertile Connecticut soil on her small brown hands; Laurel, with a smudge on her small, nondescript nose, inquiry in her clear grey eyes, and a disconsolate weed caught in her thrush-brown hair; Laurel, four years Elaine's senior, own cousin to that Lily Maid, the orphaned niece of Mrs. Adams, now resident in Adams House.

"Come here," said Elaine, adding affectionately, "You dirty little thing!"

Obediently Laurel mounted the steps and dropped to a rag rug at her cousin's feet.

"I know," she said, "and hot! You've no idea *how* hot! But the garden is going to be wonderful this year. Besides," she said, laughing a little as her grey glance roved over her own small, plump person, "I've lost two pounds since last week."

"Why bother?" inquired Elaine, from the superiority of a figure that was never too thin and always thin enough and did not vary by a pound from one year's end to another. "Laurel, the Hoods are moving in next door!"

"Well," responded Laurel, wiping the smudge off and looking at it with interest, "we've been expecting them all spring."

"You're too exasperating, Laurel!" her cousin remarked. "A new man! Next door! With a war record and a career! I think it's thrilling!"

"Wonder why he comes here," said Laurel, a little disparagingly.

"To write plays, of course. His mother was here once, in summer, a thousand years ago. Not for long. No one seems to remember her. The Hoods are from the South, I believe, or West," said Elaine, vaguely. "Anyway, they're moving in."

Laurel, rising to a full five foot three, yawned. She hesitated a moment, looking down at Elaine, who lay back in the swing and allowed the sunlight to probe her flawless skin and retire, probably discomfited, before anything so purely dazzling.

"How pretty she is," thought her cousin, "pretty enough to take an open interest in the new man next door and not be thought—well, 'anxious' as plainer girls might be." Laurel, conscious of her own snub nose and brown skin, her too rounded little figure, her grubby hands, sighed and turned to go into the house. On the threshold Mrs. Adams encountered her.

"Oh, Laurel," said that lady, agitatedly, "do look in the oven, will you?—my cake—" Her voice trailed off as she looked about her with kindly, distracted blue eyes. "There's Elaine," she said

unnecessarily, "I have her eggnog here. Oh, Laurel—the cake—!"

Laurel disappeared, smiling a little. Aunt Frances always began; Laurel always finished. Arrived at the kitchen, she knelt down before the big old-fashioned oven, flushed and tired. Dear Aunt Frances, always in a hurry, always fluttered, always kind. . . .

On the veranda, Elaine made a nose at the frothy yellow-white mixture and then drank it.

"You'll freckle," said her mother. "I never freckle," remarked Elaine serenely, "and I love the sun."

Mrs. Adams, sitting, as usual, on the edge of her chair, smoothed her working apron with nervous hands, and looked at her child. Elaine never ceased to fill her mother with wonder. How she, Frances Lowrie Adams, had succeeded in producing anything so perfect was beyond her comprehension. "Of course," she thought, "I was pretty once, but not like that." And she was right; for the beauty of Frances Lowrie had been a wild rose affair of bright hair and flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, a beauty soon dissipated, leaving a chronically worried old-young woman, angular, sweet, and with the mental processes of the grasshopper.

"Are you going to drive down to meet your father?" asked Mrs. Adams presently, "or, shall I send Laurel?"

"Laurel, by all means," answered Elaine. "The

six-twenty is always late and I hate hanging around the station. She likes it," concluded Laurel's cousin on a note of faint amusement, "says she 'adores watching the home-coming look on the men's faces.' "

"Very well, I'll tell her."

Mrs. Adams rose obediently and paused a moment.

"I see the Hoods are moving in," she said. "I hope they will be nice neighbors. That old house has been closed for so long it will seem queer," she added, and went to the door, her words trailing rather irrelevantly after her. "But it's nice to have people about once more. I wonder how many servants they will bring. They can't get them here," she added petulantly. "When I think of the trouble I have had with Rose and all general house-workers, I can't see why I bother training them, just so they can leave me for a better place—although what place would be better—"

Her voice died away. Mrs. Adams rarely finished a sentence.

"Japs," said Elaine, indifferently, "two of them. I saw them; they were flying in and out with furniture all afternoon."

"Oh, Japs," said Mrs. Adams, her hand on the door.

"I wonder—Chinese," she remarked, "are so much more reliable. You know what your father's cousin wrote back from California. . . . You don't remember Les Adams, do you, Elaine?"

Such a nice man—but his wife!—Japs,” she continued, still standing there—“I wonder—we never lock our doors, Elaine—?”

Elaine raised an eyebrow. Mother was so like Mother.

“The silver is safe, I imagine,” she said, lazily. “Don’t worry, Mother.”

Mrs. Adams, still wondering, audibly, wandered into the house, her thin, rather sweet voice raised, “Laurel! Laurel dear!”

“She’ll tell her about the Japs,” mused Elaine, in her swing, “and probably forget all about the six-twenty.” Her smile, as she drifted off into day dreams, was kindly and lightly superior.

Laurel, the cake question settled, was cramming in her own particular boxes and bags when Mrs. Adams drifted into the bedroom.

“They’ve Jap servants next door,” she announced abruptly. “Laurel, *do* you think it safe?”

“For the Japs?” asked Laurel, her hands full of bright-colored stuffs, the scent of the Orient in her nostrils, and her heart three thousand and then another thousand miles away.

“No, not for the Japs, for the neighbors.”

“Why, Auntie,” Laurel sat back on her heels and turned a rosy brown face toward Mrs. Adams, “they’re excellent servants. They may leave in the night, but there’s always another one there. Like the egg within an egg, oodles of them, eggs without end, which Daddy used to bring me, carved in wood. —Who’s going to meet Uncle George?” she

asked abruptly, starting to repack her treasures.

"Oh—you," said her Aunt, recalled to her mission. "That's what I came up to tell you."

"All right. Tub then, and dress," said Laurel, on her feet and giving herself orders. "Look, don't you love it?"

She had reserved one scarf—a rather wonderful thing, a riot of blues and scarlets, beautifully dyed and woven. Laurel draped it around her shoulders and went to the glass.

"Oh, lovely!" said Mrs. Adams, absently. "Did your father bring it to you?"

Mrs. Adams always said "your father" to Laurel. She couldn't call Captain Dale "Jim" even now that he was dead. She had always been a little frightened of the tall, silent Naval officer who had met her little sister, Lucy, in Boston and married her after a three weeks' courtship. She sighed a little. Lucy dead and buried in that heathen land, Lucy in her grave in China, beside her sailor husband, after that fearful epidemic of four years ago. And Lucy's child, brought home to them . . . she remembered Laurel, the Laurel of four years ago. "But she's happy now," Mrs. Adams told herself stoutly. "We've made her happy—and she has Elaine."

Laurel was speaking, had been for some minutes. Mrs. Adams, rousing herself, picked up the thread.

". . . always remembered to bring us something when he went on long cruises. But we followed wherever we could. Of course there were

months of just waiting for mail, and waiting in such funny places. . . .”

She turned away from her aunt, the memory of the funny places strong upon her. Captain Dale had seen much foreign service. Laurel shut her eyes and smelled the *lei* wreaths and heard surf on the white Hawaiian beach; she thought of the blue and yellow macaw she had so loved in Manilla; she remembered the reek and secrecy of China; and she saw the men, in their white uniforms, and heard a Station band. But she shook herself. She mustn't remember too much or Daddy would come, tall Daddy with the brown eyes and the straight, true mouth, and little Mother with her dark hair and the eyebrows that were like wings. . . .

“Bathe and dress,” said Laurel aloud, and ran into the bathroom to turn on the hot water.

When she came again into the bedroom which she shared with her cousin, she found Elaine there alone before the gilt-framed wall mirror, the scarf about her head and throat.

Laurel, in her boy's bathrobe, stopped short.

“Oh, how beautiful!” she said, and then, generously, “take it, Elaine, it grew for you!”

Elaine, flushed with delight, bestowed a fleeting caress on the smaller girl.

“Thanks, awfully,” she said, “it will look so well with the white evening gown. I hope we have cool evenings this summer,” she laughingly added. “Sure you don't mind?”

“Mind? I'd love you to have it. I'm too dumpy

and brown," said Laurel, and waited a moment, but no comforting contradiction came. "It's Javanese, I believe, the original Batik. . . ."

But Elaine, flying to her mother with the scarf, was not interested, and Laurel, getting into her pheasant-brown sport suit with the funny little hat that no one but Laurel could have worn, remembered that Elaine did not care where things came from or who had made them come; that Elaine loved just the things themselves and needed no background to make them dearer. But to Laurel that Javanese scarf had always been a woven bit of Romance. . . .

As she left the house for the garage, Elaine called to her from the open bedroom window.

"Jerry will be here for dinner. Drive fast—that train is always late. Hurry."

Driving to the station in the modest car, Laurel pondered. Jerry again. Poor Jerry was too nice a boy to be a door mat. He was Elaine's grammar and high school adorer, he was just Elaine's age, he was the son of the "richest man in town," and had always lived in Stonystream. It was a shame, mused Laurel, driving along the sweet-smelling brown road, that his people hadn't let Jerry go to college. He hated the hardware business. . . .

The train was on time. She waved gaily to Uncle George, fat, short, red-faced Uncle George, as he came puffing up the platform.

"Hello," said Mr. Adams climbing in beside her. "Beastly trip. But don't tell Elaine I said so. As

long as she has this ridiculous city idea in her pretty little head she'll seize on every excuse to make me move there."

Laurel laughed and turned the car toward home, nodding at a few familiar faces—the station agent, for instance, with his lean, dark face and the expressive, movable bump on one cheek; and Jerry's important, massive father, arguing about freight.

Jerry was there when they reached Adams House. He was a short, stocky boy, with deepset eyes and a really beautiful mouth. Presently, after Mr. Adams had "washed up," they sat down to dinner around the shining oval table, indifferently waited upon by the somewhat wilted Rose, who was her mistress's latest despair. And after the soup tureen had been carried away and Mr. Adams had made a few remarks on the comatose state of the wholesale linen business, he said, pushing back his chair.

"By the way, funny thing, but I met young Hood today. Lunched at the Lawyers' Club with Sam Redford and he was there with a friend. Nice chap. You'll like him, Elly. I've promised that we'll call and all that."

"Oh," said Elaine, for once ignoring the hated "Elly." "Tell me, what does he look like?"

Mr. Adams puzzled, his light eyebrows tangled.

"Tall," he said, finally, "sort of dark. Good-looking, I guess you girls would call him. Honest, open sort of face."

Mrs. Adams, her mind still on the Japs, looked relieved. Laurel smiled, and Elaine groaned.

Jerry Jones, his eyes on her animated, exquisite face, laughed softly.

"Not interesting enough, Elaine?" he asked, teasingly.

"Awful!" she answered. "Honest and open! I never heard of anything less calculated to thrill me. When are they coming to live?—They're having furniture moved in now," she added.

"Let's see," Mr. Adams wiped the coffee from a greying red mustache, worn in the late lamented Lord Dundreary fashion, and pondered. "Today's Wednesday? Day after tomorrow then—Friday."

Dinner disposed of, Laurel went to the upright piano in the red and brown living room, the comfortable, ugly room of no period whatever, and sang ridiculous nursery rhymes in a hushed voice for her uncle who, a Boston paper on his knees, nodded in a Morris chair. Mrs. Adams, sewing something white for Elaine, sat beside him, tapping a still delicate foot to the minor, quaint melodies which Laurel "made up." And Laurel, whose brown throat housed the clear, heartbreakingly sweet voice of a bird, if there be contralto birds, sang her muted songs and dreamed her quiet dreams. On the porch Jerry Jones sat besides Elaine in the swing and watched an adolescent moon touch the maples with silver fire. . . .

"Oh, but you're *beautiful*, Elaine!" he said huskily.

Elaine, her hand behind her head, the Javanese scarf framing her white loveliness, nodded.

"So you've said before!" she answered, lightly.
"Do you suppose we'll like the Hoods, Jerry?"

Jerry, with the quick jealousy characteristic of him, said something which sounded suspiciously like,

"Don't know and care less!"

"Oh," said Elaine, smiling at him, "how silly!
As if . . ."

She didn't finish. She didn't have to. Jerry supplied the blanks to his own satisfaction "as if any one mattered beside you, Jerry." The sulky line about his mouth relaxed and he put out a strong arm to sway the ropes of the swing ever so lightly. Down Maple Avenue the couples were passing and repassing, black coat sleeve by white frock. Laughter came and frank, soft giggles, and the measured tread of feet, the click of high heel, and the eternal whispers.

Maple Avenue in May . . .

Inside the house Laurel's lovely voice grew clearer: she had abandoned the nursery rhymes for something almost as young and almost as touching:

*"Kiss while ye dare and laugh while ye may,
Spring comes but once, and Spring will not
stay. . . ."*

CHAPTER II

ON THE DECORATIVE QUALITIES OF STAINED GLASS

*He watched her kneeling at her prayer,
With folded hands and meek, bowed head,
And raised his own high altar, where,
His own young prayers—to her—were said.*

Sunday the day; nine-thirty the time; and the low, livable, frame structure next to Adams House, the place. In the sunny yellow chintz and polished mahogany dining room, Anne Hood brewed matchless coffee for her son, Robert, more intimately known as Robin. Sunlight on Robin's close-cropped, dark head revealed amusing tints of copper, sunlight on the silver and glass of the percolator created a pleasant glitter, and sunlight on the youthful face, the young, black eyes and wonderful white hair of Robin's mother, made a picture not to be forgotten. A charming scene: a likable man, from the lean, good looks of him; a remarkably pretty and alert woman.

"More coffee?" asked Mrs. Hood, smiling at her son.

Robin passed his cup and spoke a soft word to the great grey police dog who, entering unobserved, had crawled close to his master's feet, under

the mistaken impression that he could remain in the forbidden precinct of the dining room unnoticed.

"Outside, Poilu."

With shamed tail between reluctant legs, Poilu departed.

Robin laughed.

"Trench manners," he remarked, and then, looking from the many leaded windows to the green lawn beyond, "splendid day. I'm all for this place, Mother. You were inspired."

"More inspired than I dreamed," she answered gaily. "There are two pretty girls next door. While you unpacked your books yesterday I employed time and eyes to a better purpose. And while you overslept this morning, Poilu and I made acquaintances."

Robin pushed back his chair and, given the maternal permission, lighted a cigarette.

"Girls!" said he. "I came here to work!"

His mother, ignoring the implication, answered carelessly.

"One is tall, Helen of Troy in appearance and Saint Cecelia in manner. The other is a round little person with the most appealing eyes I have ever seen and a speaking voice that beggars description. Lovely, Robin. We were in the garden this morning, Poilu and I, and Poilu leaped the hedge and overturned a lady—the little one. I made his apologies, of course, but the lady sat upon the ground and gathered that graceless dog to her heart. You'll like her, Robin. She has a best-seller name—Laurel!

Dale. And she lives with her aunt and uncle, and with her cousin, Helen of Troy, next door.

"Is her name really Helen?" asked Robin idly, winking at Poilu who sat stiffly between hall and dining room.

"Elaine—she told me so—Elaine Adams. Robin, my son, you came to the wrong place to work!"

"Adams! By Jove," said Robin, coming suddenly to life, "that's the ruddy, out-of-Dickens chap I met at the Lawyers' Club on Wednesday. Awfully good sort. He told me he was to be our neighbor."

"I liked the girls," said his mother, simply. "If I could arrange it I'd adopt them both. One for Sundays, moonlight and sunset; the other for weekdays, autumn and early morning."

"Well," said Robin amiably, "you generally get what you go after. But spare me. I'm going to be the busiest, grouchiest man in three counties for several months. But I'm glad you've found some playmates of your own age."

Mrs. Hood laughed and Robin, rising, crossed to her and bent to kiss the soft hair which was drifted snow above the black challenge of her eyebrows. They were very close, these two. Fatherless since his infancy, Robin had not, consciously, felt any lack. Anne Hood had been father, mother, sister and sweetheart to her only child. And living abroad as they had been doing since his fifth year, they had the added bond of much travel together, browsing about in strange places, living in out of the

way villages, learning to know and love the people and tongues of many lands. When Robin was at Oxford his mother had taken a house near him, and when he had entered the war, first as a small cog in the British machine, later transferring to his own army in the aviation corps, she had lived in Paris and worked too hard in an American hospital to have much time for fear,—except at night. And, the war over, they had traveled and helped where they could, and now were back again in their own land, a land Robin knew very little of, a land revealed to him through fleeting visits, but a land kept dear and holy to him by his mother. Why she had chosen to remove him from it in the beginning he had never asked. But in his heart he thought that the death of his father, after a few years of extraordinary happiness, had put a restlessness into the soul of his mother, an insatiable *wanderlust* into her very feet.

“Where are you going?” she asked him as, Poilu at his heels, he stood in the hallway and flicked a hand at her in farewell.

“More unpacking,” said Robin, “after a turn in the garden.”

“I would like,” she said, “to go to church and I would like an escort.”

“Mother! On such a day, to mew yourself up in a stuffy building and listen to a country dominie’s doctrine of damnation!”

He departed, and Anne, left alone, looked from the windows to catch a glimpse of tweed coat and

dark head, and smiled gently to herself. There was green in the coat, Lincoln green for Robin Hood.

Robin, strolling by the hedge with a blue coil of smoke surrounding him spoke severely to Poilu.

“. . . to knock a lady down, my friend! Boche manners. Boche instincts. And you, who fought for chivalry, you of the Red Cross, symbol of gentleness and mercy! I blush for you, Poilu, And a little lady at that. . . . Hello!”

Poilu, meek eyes—but with a glint of mischief back of them—raised to his god, found himself ignored. Robin, arrested in mid speech, was staring rudely. Poilu, following his example, was bored and fell to chasing a long grey tail to pass the time until his master should condescend to speech with him again. For only the tall one had Robin's eyes. The little one, the one Poilu had rudely cast to earth, the one with the soft hands and softer voice and the heart which could comprehend a dog's exuberance in late springtime, the little one whose image a repentant police dog cherished, was not there. Poilu, uninterested, turned his back on Adams House.

Not so Robin. He had seen the Spring. She moved about the neighboring lawn, light as the wind, her yellow head bare. She had seen him, had taken his measure. . . . With an effort, Robin withdrew his gaze and walked away, unnecessarily snapping a brown thumb and finger at Poilu. But he had seen! And then he heard.

"Laurel," called Elaine from over the hedge to some unseen, thrice fortunate person, "Laurel! It's time to get ready for church."

She had vanished, and the world was darker. Robin, strolling into the house, found his mother in her bedroom and, standing at the door, he remarked, casually.

"I won't be long, I'll change and then we'll go to church."

"Good boy," said Anne, with ready approval, but her dark eyes, the inheritance of a Californian from remote Spanish ancestors, were lowered to hide their dancing. Mrs. Hood had looked from a window, and she understood. But she was a wise woman, a discreet woman, so she merely said, "good boy," and went on looking critically at one of the six Rue de la Paix hats she had unpacked from a treasure trove trunk.

Robin smiled, somewhat sheepishly—even his adoring parent admitted that to herself—and disappeared only to return with an alarmed expression and to deliver himself of the apparently idiotic remark,

"But there must be several churches!"

Mrs. Hood laid aside the hat. She nodded at her reflection in the glass and answered, serenely.

"There are. But the Episcopal Church, my church, is very near. I asked our next door neighbors the direction and they told me. They attend it."

A sigh of relief from Robin! A casual,

"Shall I drive you or shall we walk?"

"Walk, by all means. I haven't recovered from our drive of day before yesterday. Run along and dress, and don't," she added in the ancient formula, laughing, "forget to wash behind your ears!"

Robin, a while later, realized that he had never fully appreciated church. This was such a wonderful church. To be sure, it was little, and white, a modest building, and the pews were hard, the cushions but matter of looks and concession, slippery affairs, dingily red. And the choir—but really, with the exception of one voice—the choir! However, a beautiful church. There was one window of stained golden and scarlet glass, a memorial to one George Adams, bearing a date. And beneath it, sat a girl.

The scarlet and golden light touched her gently, the small grave face, the parted roseleaf lips. Robin was dimly conscious that there were others in that superlatively blessed pew,—a thin, anxious-looking woman, and the round, rubicund man who had nodded to him as he entered the church. Only dimly, however. What keen sight was his, was concentrated, under the cover of hymnbooks and things—concentrated, consecrated, devoted. . . .

Before the collection there was a solo. Even Robin tore his eyes and thoughts away for a moment, as the dream voice rose above the brave wheeze of the organ and floated into the church, a part of the golden and scarlet light, a part of the sunshine and the birds which, observant of the Sab-

bath, held their own joyous service beyond the open windows.

The song over, he turned to his mother with a question in his eyes.

"The other neighbor," she whispered, reprehensibly, to him. "Poilu's friend—the little one named Laurel."

But Robin had not observed the singer. His eyes were shut during the music she had made. He heard the song, but he saw—Elaine.

After the service, the small congregation rustled and clattered down the wooden steps into the full light of day. Mrs. Hood had stopped to speak to the pastor, as was the unwritten law. Robin, beside her, acknowledged introductions, gave thanks for friendly solicitude, spoke of the weather. But he was watching, he was looking elsewhere. They were coming. *She* was coming, with three others. Would they pass by? He felt an extraordinary impulse of friendship toward that round and ruddy man who neared him, smiling, hesitated, and then turned back.

"It's Mr. Hood, of course," said Mr. Adams. "Well, I'm glad to see you with us."

The others had hesitated too, were about to go. Robin accomplished a hasty presentation and Mrs. Hood gave her slim, still youthful hand into the cordial Adams' grasp.

They spoke—of what, Robin never knew. He kept his dark eyes fixed on his neighbor, compelling, almost pleading.

"Frances," said Mr. Adams. "Oh, Frances . . . ?" he searched, found, and beckoned. And three women moved toward him.

"My wife, Mrs. Hood—and Mr. Hood. My daughter, Elaine and my niece, Miss Dale."

It was done. A simple act, a casual word, and something of enormous importance had taken place. The spring world was different, a small New England town was Arcady. And Robin looking into two blue eyes, soft eyes and guileless eyes, was lost.

They walked home together, four in the vanguard, two in the rear.

"And," said Elaine sweetly, "we're glad to have neighbors, too."

From which one adduces Robin's remark.

At the corner of Maple and McKinley, Robin remembered to apologize to Laurel for Poilu.

"I am most sincerely sorry," he said, looking down into shining grey depths and thinking, "jolly little person," as he did so, "but the war ruined Poilu's manners. I thought it would have sobered him, but not so. Reaction, I suppose."

Laurel laughed.

"He couldn't help it," she said, "and you mustn't scold him. I suppose the weather went to his head. Besides, I don't blame him. I am—well, upsettable—I roll, I imagine. That comes of being small and fat."

"Not fat," said Robin with ready gallantry. "Poilu and I will not admit that."

He was charming with all women, was Robin.

From nine to ninety, scrub women or great ladies. Cleanly charming, delightful. And all could win from him this dark, absorbed glance, this protective, delicately guarding manner. Laurel, on a heart beat, recognized it for what it was, a manner. She was clear-sighted, and wondered as she talked to him, what Robin would be like with the One Woman. As he turned to speak to Elaine, a second later, on another, more painful heartbeat, Laurel thought she knew.

As Robin made his way with his mother toward the house where Sunday dinner and two perfect Japs awaited them, and also Poilu, he said,

"They said to come over whenever I like. How friendly and simple people are in this part of the world!"

Mrs. Hood laughed and, after the manner of mothers, she also sighed.

"Yes, aren't they—but you are presentable, Robin."

"Thanks to you!"

They had entered the hall. Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee, as Robin had named the two positively twinlike servants, were busy about their fragrant kitchen tasks. Robin threw his felt hat to the hall seat with a suppressed shout.

"War's over," said he, "and I'm ready to play!"

"Your work?" suggested Anne, mounting the stairs, and turning to look at him from the landing.

"That will come, and all the more readily for the relaxation. Mother, will you ask Dum where the

deuce he packed my racket? I can't seem to find it."

He was rummaging in a roomy hall closet now, and looked about and up to catch his mother's gaze, a quizzical affair. Robin stirred under it, laughed, and with a sudden inspiration, shut himself into the closet, snapping on the electric light as he did so. He wanted to dance and sing, he wanted to write verse and bay it at the moon. He was a lunatic, a madman, a god . . . !

Anne, in her one room, struggled between the laugh and the sigh once more. She laughed with joy to see Robin so wide awake, so happy. He had needed arousing, the war had silenced him, his Oxford years had given the surface just the slightest uniform veneer: this was what Robin had needed—Stonystream and Adams House. And she sighed, for Robin was her son, her one human tie, her everything.

The sigh won.

CHAPTER III

LAUREL WRITES A LETTER AND ELAINE RECEIVES ONE

*The tender heart, the little heart, it knows its own
delight,
It sings its own courageous song throughout the
lonely night;
The little heart, the tender heart, it gives and asks
no gain,
And binds its patient wounds, and wears a regal
robe of pain.*

Stonystream has very fetching ways in June. Robin, shaving by the open bathroom window, perceived this. He had been a neighbor of Adams House for two weeks. He had gained two pounds, contrary to the lover tradition; he had not so much as uncovered a reproachful looking typewriter; he had seen Elaine every day and was daily rediscovering what a very pleasant place the world was.

Mrs. Hood, meantime, had made friends, among them, Mrs. Adams. To Anne Hood there was something to be gained from Mrs. Adams. That hurried, irrelevant woman was capable, she judged, of great sacrifice and much patience. They sewed together on sunny mornings on the screened side

porch of Adams House. And Mrs. Hood, listening with understanding and intelligence, became aware of two things; first, that her mother was afraid of Elaine; second, that his wife was afraid of Mr. Adams.

She was sewing there now, after breakfast, when Elaine, Jerry Jones—it was Saturday—and Robin came in from the tennis court of Adams House and flung themselves in various relaxed attitudes on the wicker couch. That is, Jerry and Robin flung! Elaine seated herself in a chair and seemed unruffled as to hair and unheated as to countenance. She was that sort of a girl.

“Where’s Laurel?” asked Mrs. Hood.

Elaine looked surprised.

“Didn’t she come in with us? Oh, she’s putting away the rackets, I guess.”

“Did you have a nice game?” asked Mrs. Adams, looking up from her sewing, her near-sighted eyes magnified by the thick-lensed glasses she wore—when she could find them.

“Nice!” repeated Jerry, with a rude snort. “Sheer murder! Hood and Elaine beat the everlasting daylights out of us! Such sets! Six—one! Six—one! Six—one!”

“But then,” remarked Laurel, entering, a wisp of hair in her eyes and her cheeks as red as the June rose, and her nose, alas, as shining as her eyes, “but then, Jerry, consider my age, and my bulk! I simply couldn’t run, and Robin Hood has a wicked serve.”

They lingered for a while, the four, with the two older women, and then, rising, Robin said, reluctantly.

"Must go."

Jerry, who sincerely liked Robin and at the same time as sincerely hated him, said, "must you?" and looked relieved.

"Must," replied Robin firmly, looking at Elaine. But Elaine, examining her mother's fine, even stitches, said nothing and did not raise her yellow head. "Work," said Robin, more firmly still. "But I'll see you all later."

He smiled at his mother and Mrs. Adams, looked again at that beloved daffodil crown, waved a gay hand at Jerry and Laurel and departed, whistling for Poilu as he went.

"That play," said Mrs. Hood, "will never be written!"

Laurel, strolling with Jerry to the gate half an hour later, said, "why don't you ever come up evenings any more, Jerry?"

Jerry, a sulky toe kicking at an unoffending stone, grunted impolitely.

"I never see Elaine alone any more."

Laurel was silent, and Jerry, who knew her sympathetic heart of old, took her hand in a little, convulsive squeeze. "He's an awfully fine fellow," said Jerry, and left her. Laurel, standing motionless by the white gate in the full noonday sun, thought stocky, inarticulate Jerry a very gallant person. Then she turned and went slowly through

the garden, weeding here, tending there, until the gong sounded for luncheon.

The meal about over, Laurel's quick ear heard a scratch on the screen door leading into the hall. "That's Poilu!" she said, and ran to open the door. The grey dog wagged a friendly tail and looked up at his particular comrade with an intelligent eye. To his collar something white was attached. Laurel, detaching it, read the name on the envelope, "Miss Adams," and stooped to pat the messenger. But he waited, patiently, at the door, not turning, to race home again as was his habit. "An answer," Laurel thought, and bore the note to her cousin.

Elaine, the least faint flush on her face, opened it and read, but not aloud:

"Dear Lily Maid:

"I am going canoeing this afternoon. Will you go with me? Just a tour of exploration. The wonderful Dum has made us cake and we'll take tea in a thermos. Please. And wear a big hat—pale green for choice—for the sun is strong and the color is becoming. I'll call for you at two-thirty."

And he signed himself as Adams House had come to call him—one word, in the small, characteristic hand: "Robinhood."

"Poiu's waiting," suggested Laurel.

Elaine, considering, walked to the spinet desk in the living room, wrote in her schoolgirl lettering, "thanks, I'll come," signed it, primly, "E. A.," and gave the missive to Laurel, who tucked it in

Poilu's collar, ordered "good dog, go home," and watched him streak, furry grey lightning, across the lawn and over the dividing hedge.

At two-thirty Robin appeared, flanneled and sweated, and waited ten minutes before Elaine descended to him. The large and shady hat was not pale green, but blue, and Robin, rising at her unhurried entrance, could not quarrel with the substitution. For the rest, a sheer blouse, a sweater to match the hat, a linen skirt and white clad feet combined to make her, according to Robin's riotous heart, the most beautiful person in the world.

They walked to the docks, perhaps a mile away, and climbed into the scarlet canoe which Robin had recently purchased, and pushed off, down past the houses and the landings, around the first turn, and away, on a silver, empty stream, tree-bordered, narrow and enticing. Elaine, lying among the vivid cushions, trailed a hand in the water and said very little; and Robin, warm and happy, watched the bright drops fall from his paddle and hummed a gipsy tune beneath his breath.

At four they beached their craft among some lily weed under a wide spreading tree, ate their feast, and then went on again.

They talked, in snatches, Robin, for the most part, occupying the conversational floor. He talked of the plays he wanted to write, true plays, fine plays, American plays for Americans. And Elaine listened. She liked to watch Robin when he was interested—his dark eyes had such a light in

them, his face was so shining with his purpose.

The canoe drifted into a little side stream, and presently they bumped against a rough dock. Robin roused himself and looked about.

"There's a house," he said. "Look, a jolly little house all logs and branches. It looks closed. Dare you go up with me and peek into the windows? Do you know to whom it belongs?"

"This isn't Stonystream any more," she said practically, "it's Winding River, I imagine. We've come a long way and that's the next settlement in this direction. Why do you want to see it? It's just a house."

"Oh, no, it isn't," said Robin, seriously. "It is *not* 'just a house' at all. No house ever is. It's an Enchanted Castle, or a Witches' Retreat, or a Pirates' Den, or something like that. Or, it may be a Lost Home! Come on, be a sport!"

They drew the canoe up the curving brown bank and tethered to a convenient birch; then stole up the slope, skirting the house very stealthily, like conspirators. Elaine didn't fancy the game much, it was too childish, she thought, but Robin, catching her hand, with a great show of secrecy, insisted.

Reaching a window, they peered in, stood for a moment lost in astonishment, and then, silently, on a single impulse, turned and fled.

"It *is* a Pirates' Den," said Robin with deep conviction. "What did I tell you?"

Elaine was breathless when they reached the canoe.

"What an awful looking old man!" she said, as they pushed off.

Robin turned in amazement.

"Did you think so? I liked him! Wonderful head and a tragic mouth. And what a room—almost bare as a cell, but atmosphere you could cut with a knife! Never saw anything to touch it! I wonder who he is? Did you ever see any one write like that—throwing the sheets on the floor and growling to himself?"

"Never," said Elaine, "and I don't want to again!"

When they reached Adams House, disgracefully late, they were full of the adventure, or at least Robin was.

"I say, Laurel," he said, using her given name unconsciously, "we've just had an amazing thing happen. Ran into a house—no, a cock—in a place my lady companion says is Winding River. Went up to the house—a log affair, and gazed through a window. What a room and what a man! Old fellow, lots of iron grey hair and beetling red eyebrows. I didn't see his eyes. Saddest mouth in the world. Big chap, I should imagine; shoulders on him like a longshoreman. And writing, if you please, just pages, with a scratchy fountain pen, and throwing the sheets, unblotted, to the floor. I saw a typewriter and a desk file and about a million books. Otherwise, with the exception of a rough stone fireplace, a couch covered with skins and one comfortable-looking carpentered chair, the place

was as bare as my hand. Who do you suppose he can be? A personality anyway, I bet my last ten cents on that!"

Elaine shrugged, fastidiously.

"I thought him hideous," she said, "and the place worse."

But Laurel was thinking.

"Where have I heard—? What?—Oh, Robin-hood!" she said, looking up and reflecting his own excitement, "that must be John Wynne, the playwright!"

The room reeled about Robin.

"No! Not really! The recluse, who never comes up to his own first nights, and who won't meet people? The master craftsman of us all? Living here, within a few miles of me? It's too good to be true, Laurel! I'll go there again and break a leg or something to get a chance to see him. Of course I couldn't possibly have recognized him—he never allows himself to be photographed. And I have thought all along that he was just a legend; that it was the pen-name of some one we all might know and see every day on Broadway. By Jove, what luck!"

Elaine was staring. She couldn't understand Robin's excitement over such an unattractive, unsociable-looking old person in a little obscure shack. But Laurel had stars in her eyes.

"I've heard about him," she said, "from the librarian here. It seems he sends to Stonystream for books. Sends a funny old man who appears to live

there with him, his only companion. Elsie—that's the librarian—says the man brings a note each time. He's 'foreign,' she says, probably an Indian or Mexican or something. Anyway, he's dumb. He goes to the village of Winding River for Mr. Wynne's supplies, always with a typewritten note. And she says Wynne has lived there for at least six years and has never exchanged a word with any one in all that time. I think he is tragic."

"So do I," agreed Robin. "It is, somehow, pitiful. I wonder what's wrong with him? A deformity? A hatred of mankind? But he can't always have lived so, for his plays show too great a knowledge of human nature. And he must be tremendously well off, too, because he has had steady successes for at least fifteen years. Have you seen his plays—or read them? No? I have them, all of them, a uniform edition. I'll bring them over. They are simply stupendous! Stark Greek things, poignant and real as Life,—more real, perhaps. Gosh, what a discovery! I must go home and tell Mother. She has always admired Wynne though she doesn't in the least agree with him."

He was gone. Elaine, going to her room to dress for dinner, remarked, over her shoulder,

"Isn't Robin too funny? As excited as a child with a new toy over that ridiculous old man. I wish you had seen him, Laurel. Awful!"

Laurel, driving down for Uncle George, wished so too.

Late that night, long after she had been in bed, Laurel rose, and carefully gathering up pencil and paper, stole from the room in her thick, brown bathrobe and, without waking Elaine, went down the stairs. It had turned cool in the evening, and there were still red embers on the open hearth of the living room. She switched on a single light and, sitting cross-legged beside the dying fire, wrote:

"This is for you, Robin. I've been thinking of you all this long evening at home. You didn't come over. Jerry was here with Elaine. But I heard Poilu barking and I heard you laughing with your mother—the night was so still. I suppose you were telling her all about John Wynne. Will you take her with you next time? Of course he will let you in. How could he help it Robin, if you stood at his door with that little-boy look in your eyes and said, with your own most dazzling-dear smile, 'Please, may I?'

"But you'd rather take Elaine, I think, than your mother—or me—

"It doesn't hurt to love you, Robin,—it's wonderful because you are wonderful. And you needn't worry—I think Elaine cares for you. I am afraid you'll have to care the most, Robinhood, but she's so very beautiful that it doesn't matter much, does it?

"You're so dear to me always—funny little Laurel, fat and insignificant. Just Laurel, 'a good sort.' I know you think that; heard you say it once. I was glad, Robin.

"Goodnight. Perhaps as she grows to love you more, Elaine will find her heart, her real heart, not

just her emotions. How could she help it, Robin? But she is a Sleeping Beauty now—just waiting, and stirring a little in her sleep.

“Goodnight. I couldn’t sing for you the other night as you asked me to. I was afraid. Sometimes the song might tell you too much. I know.

“LAUREL.”

She sat still for a full ten minutes, the loose pad sheets in her brown hands, her eyes on the last flickering flame. And then her hands unclosed and the sheets fluttered to the floor. This was not the first letter, nor yet the second. She had torn up the others. She had hated to, but where could she keep them safe from mishap and chance?

Laurel, for all her twenty-five years, chuckled. She got to her feet and slipped noiselessly out into the moonless, star-bright night. In her bathrobe and slippers, her heavy braids swinging, she fled down the garden path between the roses, an incongruous dryad. And, finally, reached the post-office box she had discovered when first she came. No one else knew of it; she had hidden books there, had climbed the old gnarled apple tree and read through long, quiet afternoons; had dreamed there, and had cried for Daddy and for Little Mother. Into the deep hole in the apple tree, then, went the letter to Robin. . . .

A light was still burning in the house next door—Robin’s window. It was after midnight but she heard, for the first time, the steady click of the

typewriter, and sent a little wish flying through the darkness to speed the work. And then, more slowly, by the rose-hedged path, she came home, switched out the light, and climbed to her room.

As she lay down in the small white bed next to Elaine's she turned toward her cousin. The stars were very bright. Dimly she could see the white outline of a cheek and the wonderful hair spread like a dull gold siren's net upon the linen. Elaine was very lovely. Laurel, who worshipped Beauty in all her manifestations, sighed. Elaine was very lovely. But, was there not a lack—?

"Oh, disloyal!" whispered Laurel fiercely to herself, and turning again, slipped her hand under her round cheek and presently, a little unhappy, a little rebellious, slept.

CHAPTER IV

IN WHICH ROBIN IS CONFIDENTIAL AND
JERRY MEETS THE FLAPPER

*Youth has such secret knowledge: youth is wise,
And youth is gay;
And looks with blind and visionary eyes
Upon today!*

While the ancient appletree guarded its pencilled secret, while Robin worked by night on a rough draft of his first act and played by day with Elaine of Adams House; while Mrs. Adams watched with dismay and delight, and Mrs. Hood with emotions even more mixed; while Laurel whispered absurdities into a dog's soft grey ear and effaced herself as much as possible, and while Jerry Jones, hating the hardware business, applied himself to it with a single-heartedness which charmed his father into raising his salary; while all these things were happening, Stonystream took a new lease on life and began to preen itself for summer trade. Watkins and Watkins, on the corner of Main and Front, restocked its shelves and polished up the green and red globes in the two windows, and hung out alluring signs exploiting "Maple Heart Sundaes, 22 cents," or advising "Try our Luscious Marshmallow Mint,"

"Take Your Girl A Box of Debutantes' Delight, Fresh Every Day." In Lowell's General Store, canoe paddles and cushions made a summery showing, and sweaters of every shade, wool of every texture, and bathing suits of every cut, made bold bids to catch the passerby's attention. The one garage and the two livery stables began to polish brass and clean leather. And the wide front veranda of the Inn showed signs of armed activities, scrubwomen and window cleaners appeared from nowhere and went about their tasks with fixed and purposeful faces, with rank on rank of suds-foaming buckets, with mops and brooms, vacuum cleaners and dust pans. For it was nearing the last week of June and the summer visitors were on their way.

The Inn opened on the 28th. As with automatic magic, on the 29th., the smooth fairways and velvet greens of the links were dotted with gay figures in short skirts and sweaters, and serious forms in knickers and long, colorful stockings. The quiet bosom of the river became animate with life; the tennis courts of Inn and Club echoed to shouts and laughter and the applause of galleries; and the streets, Main Street, Front Street and all the rest, took on new dangers and interests. On Hillcrest the houses began to look like dwellings; great ramping motor cars flew up that aristocratic slope, burdened with servants, with dogs, with bags and boxes and, perhaps three days later, vanished, to return again bearing, more sedately, the employers

of the servants, the owners and possessors of dogs and bags and boxes.

"This town," said Robin to his mother about July first, "is becoming demoralized."

"I like it," said she—"So many pretty daughters and prettier mammas, so many efficient-looking papas and attractive sons."

But Robin only made noises in his throat. He had no use for the attractive sons. He had seen 'em: well-set up lads, just out of or just in college, boys with clear eyes and strong limbs and the air of conquerors. And then the week-enders, not only papas, but the hustling young business men, known to fame as depicted in current magazines, the alert type, with golf bags and tennis rackets, with the soft pleasant clink of invisible gold about them.

Adams House lent itself to the electrified atmosphere. People began to call. The elite of Hillcrest paid its respects to the elite of Maple Avenue.

Elaine and Laurel had many acquaintances among the "summerers" who returning year after year, as birds return, found time to seek out the two "nicest girls in Stonystream," or the "prettiest peach," according to the gender of the caller, and to invite them here and there, to Club and Inn and Home festivities.

Robin, neglected for no less than three evenings, growled and talked of running up to town. He conceived an ardent desire to see Smithers, the "chap who knew managers," and after two days of looking earnestly at time-tables and packing bags, he

went. He returned the next day. New York was infernal, the asphalt gave sickeningly under the foot, the roof gardens were inane, the streets were full of the most impossible people. And Smithers, although Robin had 'phoned him, was most incomprehensibly out of town. To be sure, Smithers' aunt had taken inconsiderately to her deathbed some thirty minutes after Robin's train had left Stonystream, and in no way could Robin trace that unfortunate occurrence to Smithers. Nevertheless, he came back to Stonystream in anything but a happy humor. At dinner, Mrs. Hood, veiling the twinkle said,

"Laurel was over this morning. She is nursing Poilu's foot—"

Poilu, by way of explanation, had stepped on a particularly vicious thorn the day before Robin had left for town, and was now sitting tragically in corners with a pathetic lifted paw and hypochondriac eyes, enjoying a bit of Blighty for a change.

"He's almost well," continued Robin's mother, "but he likes attention. Laurel asked for you—said they had missed you."

"You'd never know it," said Robin, ungraciously, but he recovered his appetite during the rest of the dinner and at eight-thirty, vanished from the house, through the gap in the hedge, and knocked at the door of Adams House.

Mrs. Hood, left alone, went slowly to her room where she sat with a new book in her lap, and her mind anywhere but on the book. Later she un-

locked a secret drawer in an innovation trunk, took therefrom a yellowed photograph and, returning to her chair under the reading light, sat with it in her hands for a long time. She did not cry, she did not even look for long at the pictured face; she merely held it between her two hands and thought. She thought backwards, re-lived.

Anne Hood was not the woman to veil her eyes from the world's infinite beauty with the blinding mist of memory. She had Robin, she was comparatively young and very healthy. She enjoyed life, she lived to the uttermost of her capacities. But there were times when the recollections of two years of perfect mating struck at her heart with a poignancy not dulled by the passage of many years. These were the hours in which she sat with that photograph of the husband of her youth before her and told herself desperately that she would give everything she possessed—even to the priceless gift of Robin—for one touch of his hand again. The moment passed, of course, and she never failed to ask pardon of her own soul for the momentary ingratitude. And Robin never knew that he could not entirely fill his mother's heart. It was not Anne's way to mourn aloud even to the sympathetic ears of her son.

So now, with a fading photograph in her hands, Anne Hood sat breathless-still, and did penance.

Over at the Adams House, Robin was doing penance too. He was accused of desertion, of a number of dreadful things, and castigated himself, look-

ing into the water-clear eyes of Elaine. Later, walking alone with her in the garden while Laurel played cribbage with Uncle George, Robin tried to explain.

"You were so busy," said he, "and there were so many new people about. I began to feel as if I had been just a stop-gap between the quiet of winter and the excitement of summer."

"Oh," said Elaine, in answer, "how silly of you! As if—"

She did not finish. She didn't have to. Like Jerry Jones and others before him, Robin filled in the gaps to his own satisfaction, and his heart grew lighter by about a ton, and the scent of the roses went to his brain and he was a madman again, a controlled madman, to be sure, but insane nevertheless.

By the window, that midnight, knocking his pipe against the ledge, he watched the moonlight make white magic over the hedge and pictured it slipping, burglar-wise, through another open second-story window, illuminating and brooding over all that was beautiful and good and beloved.

He wanted most terribly to tell Elaine how beautiful, how good, how beloved, but he shut his teeth on the cold pipestem, as if the impulse had seized him to shout across the night and the hedge, and said to himself, "too soon."

But it was not too soon to confide in some one. Robin told his mother, not three days later,

"Elaine, Mother—I love her."

Mrs. Hood gave no sign that she was struck to the heart.

"I know," she said, and later, "she is a lovely girl, Robin lad. I—" she stopped, and ended firmly, "I want you to be happy."

To herself she added, on a wounded note, "if it had only been Laurel!"

Mrs. Hood had never had a daughter, but she knew the daughter-heart when she saw it shining in grave, grey eyes. And Laurel was motherless. She would never be very close to Elaine, and yet—? Why not? There was no answer, yet she knew. She kissed her son, wished him good fortune on the eternal quest, and fled, without the appearance of flight, to her own room. Perhaps Elaine was the right girl after all. Sincerely she prayed so, for Robin, married to the wrong girl, would touch depths of misery where no mother hand nor voice could reach him for counsel or for comfort.

Then he told Laurel, Robin, the blind blunderer, putting something into words which had hurt sufficiently unsaid. Yet all he asked was,

"Laurel—you must have guessed? What are my chances?"

She might have taken that another way, with the dark, absorbed look bent on her. But she didn't. She said, after a pause,

"Oh, Robinhood, I know she likes you, likes you best of all. Wait just a little. There's no one else who holds a millionth part of her attention. Wait

just a little and it will all come out all right."

And Robin, bruising her hand in his grateful fervor, thanked her and said he would wait, "you good sort, you!"

As if this were not enough, came Jerry, two nights later. And Laurel, longing for comfort, comforted; aching for self expression, listened; yearning for sympathy, gave.

Jerry was not philosophic. He left Adams House that evening without seeing Elaine again, brushed past Robin with the barest nod, and drove his new car furiously down the slope of Maple Avenue. The next day being Sunday, he drove it again, far into the country, and shirked church. Elaine went to Jerry's church, therefore Jerry attended faithful. Not to-day, for he was in no Sabbath mood. He hated women, even Laurel, who had dealt the final blow; he hated himself; he hated Robin. Out in the country then, slouched down behind the wheel, a cap pulled low over his eyes, his mouth set and his boy's heart aching. Forty miles an hour, with the new car a living, responding thing under his hand, he went, and then suddenly, coming to life, perceived, not far from him, something red which waved, and heard the faintest, shrillest shout. . . .

Jerry pulled up. He stopped, he alighted. Of all things in the world, a woman in distress! His training and his instincts stopped him, cut off the astonished motor, but his heart rebelled.

She sat on the step of a French blue roadster, a

low car, long and wicked. She wore blue overalls and her face was dirty. Under a curly riot of bobbed red hair, two friendly sea-colored eyes met Jerry's. Rather idiotically, as he advanced toward her, he wondered if she had waved her hair to halt him, but a redder sweater in her small, grimy hand enlightened him.

"Good morning," remarked the lady, brightly. "How nice of you to stop. I waved Convention's sweater at you—do you suppose she'll catch cold?"

Jerry, under the impression that he was talking to an escaped "nervous patient" from the not far distant asylum, merely goggled.

"Convention," explained the quirky red mouth before him, "is my dog. I call her that because she is easily hurt, because she is always sensitive to drafts, because she loathes anything unusual, and because she is forever sniffing around the heels of the flapper."

Jerry, his eyes directed by a careless gesture of the overalled arm discovered in the single seat of the roadster, an animal regarding him with malignant eyes, a hairless animal, hideous to look upon, which, having once riveted his attention, now gave vent to fearful miniature barks and to affected trembling.

"Beast," said Convention's mistress, but not unkindly. She rose to put the sweater about the unattractive form and turned to Jerry.

"My engine is dead," she said. "Have you any crepe?"

Jerry hated women—but this was not a woman. It was an elf thing, a sprite, a soulless Undine, a witch with red hair and greenish eyes and no less than three and a half dimples. He smiled, and Jerry, smiling, was somebody to notice. The Flapper, never unobservant, noticed now. She nodded, divested herself of the overalls, and revealed an unholy, delightful wedding of jade and oyster-white.

She pointed to the tool box.

“Get busy,” she commanded and, searching in the side pocket, produced something in gold and emeralds which contained a powder puff, a lip stick and a mirror. Thus fortified, she re-seated herself, removed some dirt with a lace handkerchief which she promptly threw in the road, and proceeded, with the utmost calmness, to repair the damage to one of the most provocative little faces in the world.

Wordless, Jerry obeyed. The matter was not serious, and at the end of ten minutes the French blue engine—it wasn’t of course, but it should have been—was purring again like a satisfied cat.

Jerry, cap in hand, prepared to climb into his own, more sedate, vehicle.

“Oh, don’t go,” said the Flapper. “I’ll turn her off and we’ll talk. Convention will chaperone us, and it’s a lovely morning.”

Jerry sat down beside her on the step.

“Brilliant idea,” said Jerry. “I’m keeping away from my family. They are, about now, missing me in church.”

The Flapper made a face.

"Oh, families!" said she, and dismissed them with a wave of her hand, caught them back, considered them, and made judicious answer. "Aren't families fearful? Nice, you know; when you want things they don't mind your having—otherwise not. My name," said she, suddenly, "is Jane. The rest doesn't matter. It's Van Wyck. And I'm eighteen, though, thank God, I don't look it. We're at the Inn, and I hate it. Where do you go to college?" she asked. "I hope it's Princeton. I was engaged once," confided Jane, gently, "to two Princeton men at the same time. Interesting, but awkward."

Jerry gasped.

"I don't go anywhere," he said, with a barely veiled bitterness. "I've lived here—in Stonystream—all my life. And to return autobiography for autobiography, I'm Jerry Jones. I'm twenty-one, and I've never been engaged—that is, not really,—at all."

The Flapper raised her dark brows and rounded her astonishing eyes.

"Not honestly!" she said, and looked him over. "I can't understand it," she added, "I can't understand it at all."

Suddenly Jerry felt very young and very irresponsible. He laughed.

"You're flirting with me, Miss Van Wyck," he accused, while Convention, with a snort, turned

around on the leather seat and pretended to go to sleep. But she had one eye open.

Miss Van Wyck looked amazed.

"Why, so I am!" she said in dark unbelief and then, guilelessly, "I always do."

"I'm afraid," said Jerry, and really meant it, "that you'll find me very dull."

"I like them dull," said Jane. "I adore to see the wheels go round. It's awful interesting as a study in human nature. Now get in your car and I'll race you to the Inn and we'll have lunch."

Jerry felt the world revolve around him. The creature was a kidnapper.

"But what will you tell your family?" he asked, truly concerned. In Stonystream girls didn't pick up strange young men on deserted roads and tow them home for luncheon—not nice girls. Yet Jerry knew that this was a nice girl.

Jane was amazed again.

"Aren't you funny?" she said. "Why, the truth, of course. I always tell 'em the truth. Then they're prepared. I hate liars. It's stupid and it's never necessary. I'll march you up to Muddie and say, 'see the nice young man I found in the road when the Brat—that's my car—got a pain in her middle and wouldn't play. Let's have lunch, I'm starving.' Come along—Jerry Jones!"

Jerry got to his feet. He had met the Human Hurricane and was a mere straw in the wind. He climbed into his car and followed a French blue

streak and was beaten by it; ignominiously, drawing up before the white portico of the Inn, in a cloud of dust, an odor of gas, a frantic honking of horns, and the sharp protests of an outraged Convention.

The cars parked, Jane slipped her hand through Jerry's arm and pulled him up the steps into the full glare of a thousand eyes. From these eyes she selected one placid pair and went straight to them.

"Muddie," said Jane, "this is Jerry—last name Jones, but I don't like it so we'll strike that out. I found him on the road and he is going to play with me this afternoon. Let's have lunch; we're famished, and I hope they'll have Napoleons."

Mrs. Van Wyck gave Jerry her hand and smiled a tired smile. She was a pretty woman, as slim as her daughter and almost as young.

"You're a dreadful child, Jane," she said, languidly. "Run along and order. Thank you," she added to Jerry, "for bringing her home safely. I always expect to see Jane carried in on a stretcher," added Mrs. Van Wyck in resigned syllables.

Jerry, blushing a little, managed a remark. He had the odd notion that there were brains beneath the languor and sharp eyes beneath the tired eyelids. Evidently he was approved. He followed Jane, first to the telephone where he 'phoned his family, and then to the door of a washroom, where she said,

"Get clean. I'll meet you in the lobby." And ten minutes later he was seated between mother and

daughter at a bay window table with about forty waiters behind his chair and fifty people staring at him, engaged in negotiating an excellent meal.

When Jerry reached home it was six o'clock. He had canoed on the river, been beaten at tennis, and had an engagement for four evenings of the following week.

When he was in bed, he thought of Elaine. The heartache had not vanished, but it was somehow different. Of course you couldn't compare the two girls. Elaine was a star, inaccessible and bright, and the Flapper was a human little thing, in dire need of protection and correction. Jerry felt very virtuous. It was his duty to lead the Flapper into other paths: she must never, never pick up strange men again; Jerry must warn her against the practice. He rather hoped it *wasn't* practice on her part but exception and not rule. She was a dear little girl and her mother ought to know better.

There was *something* about red hair, mused Jerry, and then suddenly slipped fathoms deep into dreams in which Elaine in overalls was flying fleetly down a brown road, miles ahead of him, and the Flapper was strangling Convention with the belt of a jade green sweater, on the counter of the hardware shop, with about a million people shouting all around her.

When Jerry awoke on Monday morning he made two deep resolves: one was that only over his dead body would the Flapper meet Robin; another, that on off days he must brush up his tennis.

But the Flapper didn't dream at all. She merely

awoke ravenous on Monday and had her breakfast in bed, with the Stonystream telephone book on her lap. She made a face at "hardware," memorized the number, and telegraphed to New York for the white linen knicker tennis suit which a harassed shop was late in sending. Then she dressed and telephoned to Jerry. She wanted, she pretended, the handkerchief she had, with half an eye, seen him rescue from the road.

CHAPTER V

THE HERMIT OF WINDING RIVER

*Run to the gate and hail him. Take the road
That seemed so long;
Life is so short, and he will share your load,
And sing your song.
He is not strange to you; the heart has eyes;
This is your friend! With him the new road lies.*

"Jerry's got a girl!" announced Robin with some satisfaction.

Elaine, unbelief in her eyes, sat up very straight in the porch swing and regarded him. It was a very still and warm afternoon in July. Laurel was making grapeade in the kitchen; Mrs. Adams had taken Mrs. Hood to a church festivity; and Elaine was alone with her caller.

"Not really!" said Elaine.

"Fact. Saw them today in a rather interesting looking car. The hardware business has lost a bright young man. I was walking, I and Poilu, for the good of our health; we were strolling along an unfrequented roadway. The car came up, rather slowly, Jerry at the wheel and something all eyes and red hair and a white tam beside him. I hailed them. Jerry—and may he live to regret it—

stepped on the gas. I should say by that, that he recognized me. I've seen the girl before, by the way. She's at the Inn."

Elaine was silent for a minute, and then she smiled.

"How nice for Jerry," she replied, without rancour, and when Laurel appeared with a tray and tall, frosted glasses, immediately imparted the news to her. Apparently it had made very little impression on Elaine. Yet, after Robin had gone, she lay back, thoughtful, and presently rising, went to the 'phone and called Jerry's house. He was not in but she left a message. When he came home and called her up, as bidden, her voice was light, the merest shade reproachful, and very sweet.

It was apparent to Laurel, listening to the Elaine-end of the conversation, that Jerry could not come up that evening. But tomorrow afternoon, rather late, would be all right. Elaine put the receiver back on the 'phone and went upstairs without coming out on the porch again.

"I can't understand Elaine," said Laurel to herself. She doesn't want Jerry but she doesn't want any one else to want him. Someway, it's not fair. . . ."

Jerry, "dropping in," on the following afternoon, was conscious of a feeling akin to guilt. Not that Elaine was reproachful; on the contrary, she seemed glad that he had been so pleasantly occupied of late; teased him a little with her chance knowledge. He wondered, as they sat and talked and later went out

for a spin in his car, just what the Flapper would think of Elaine. As a matter of fact, he learned later, for the Flapper, also spinning, and not alone, passed them, and on the next day commented, "Who's the Snow Queen, Jerry?"

While Jerry was driving Elaine and endeavoring to recapture the first wild careless something or other, Robin, left with an idle afternoon on idle hands, frowned at his inoffensive typewriter, considered tennis with Laurel, rejected the thought, and went for a gloomy and solitary paddle in the scarlet canoe which Laurel had named "Faux Pas" for, as she explained to the outraged owner, it was so very glaring that no one could possibly overlook it.

Half consciously he turned his course toward Winding River, bumped once more against the forbidden dock, and sat, his paddle across his knees, studying the House of Mystery. He pondered over John Wynne and the wound—if wound it were—which had caused him to bury himself alive in such an isolated spot; sat and pondered on this and many things, the tide rocking the canoe, until he was aroused from his revery by something that was half sound, half atmospheric disturbance.

Robin looked up. On the dock a small, bent figure danced and gesticulated and made loathsome animal noises in its throat. Robin stared. This must be the servant of the Wynne tradition, a man of no particular age, with long black hair falling into bright, half-witted eyes, a leather-brown skin,

and a curiously malignant mouth. The face was both tragic and repellant, scarred and twisted; the small body strong and wiry and clad in loose khaki trousers, a nondescript, collarless shirt, and despite the heat, a mackinaw. Robin, repelled and pitying, made a sign of reassurance. "I'm going!" he shouted to the creature, wondering if it were deaf as well as dumb, and was answered by a look of relief which for an instant brightened the warped features. Hastily Robin swung the canoe about, caught a crab, overturned the canoe, and, cursing himself and his curiosity, investigated the mud at the bottom of the river, rose, dripping, to the surface and swam after the drifting canoe and paddle, hampered by his sweater and shoes, very uncomfortable and very angry.

He retrieved the paddle and caught at the bow of the canoe, clearing the muddy water from his eyes. A sound reached him and, looking up, he saw the figure on the dock bent double with mirth.

Robin swore out loud. He knew he looked ridiculous and he resented it. He was as wet as possible and a long way from his landing . . . and a mile from there to his house . . . the thought was disconcerting.

Thoroughly angry, he swam toward shore, throwing the paddle into his treacherous craft and pushing it furiously before him. He beached the canoe and shook himself. The gentleman on the dock, viewing this, became alarmed; the uncanny mirth died away and he started toward the visitor with more

than threat written broad across his face and in the raised menace of two brown fists.

Something was imminent. Robin, sensing this, squared his shoulders. No man, living, dumb, or with the speech of angels, could advance thus belligerently upon him because a confounded canoe had upset him on a public waterway. He stood still to meet the oncoming guardian of the peace, fully determined to knock him down. Without rhyme or reason, of course, but Robin was annoyed. A shout, very clear, reached him. He turned, as the Mexican—or whatever he was—stopped in his tracks, and both saw, a few yards away, the man who called himself John Wynne—an enormous man, with heavy shoulders and brilliant blue eyes under the shock of grey hair and the bent, bushy red brows.

“Pedro!” said this apparition, and added something in swift Spanish. Then, as the one addressed turned sullenly away, the owner of the dock came close to our interloper.

“What are you doing here?” he asked slowly.

Robin smiled rather engagingly,

“Nothing,” he said. “I fell into your stupid river—indirectly, thanks to your man there—and I’m out of it now. I’m very wet, and very angry, and I bid you a very good afternoon.”

He turned as he spoke and started for the canoe, the water dripping from him and squelching in his tennis shoes. “Hospitable old bird,” he thought to himself, “a man might drown in his river and

he wouldn't as much as pull out the corpse!"

Expressionless eyes regarded the offended back.

"Wait a minute," said John Wynne suddenly. "I am sorry if Pedro had anything to do with your accident. He knows I dislike visitors; he has orders to keep them away. He is dumb, as you may have noticed, and something of an idiot—despite, or because of that, he is devoted to me. . . ." He gave a short bark which might have been meant for a laugh, and continued. "I am not gregarious, but as you seem very wet and doubtless have a long paddle before you, I should be happy to have you come up to the shack, to dry off and perhaps have a drink. You look as if you needed it."

Robin was so astonished that he nearly fell overboard again; he managed, however, to express his thanks and his acceptance, to tie up the canoe, and to walk to the house with his extraordinary host. They said nothing until they were within doors, and there Wynne, turning, remarked quietly.

"You are the first person, save myself and my servant, to set foot across that sill since I came here, nearly seven years ago. Welcome—" he hesitated and then added, with a singular dignity, "my home!"

"Thank you," said Robin, "but I'm rather wet. . . ."

"The floor's of stone," said Wynne, "and if you'll come in here I'll give you a bathrobe and Pedro can

dry out your things, as mine, I'm afraid, would hardly fit you."

Robin followed him into a small room adjacent to the living room, which contained an iron bedstead, two kitchen chairs and nothing more. The white plastered walls gave it the look of a monk's cell. From a closet Wynne produced a camel's hair robe, handed it to his unbidden guest, and disappeared with the words,

"Leave your things on the floor; Pedro will see to them. You'll find underwear in the closet, if you wish, makeshift garments, but perhaps they'll do."

Shortly after, Robin, feeling that he had stepped into a fairy tale as well as into clothes which, if not entirely suitable, still covered his nakedness, opened the door into the living room and found his host standing, hands behind his back, before a newly-lighted fire.

"This is awfully good of you," said Robin, rather at a loss, but accepting a glass and a bottle and a seat on the deer-skin covered couch before the hearth. "I'm sorry I intruded."

"Do you know who I am?" asked Wynne abruptly, paying no attention to the apology.

"I think so," Robin, a little taken aback, answered, straightly enough. "I came here once before and eavesdropped—eyesdropped, rather. And I asked questions of people in Stonystream. If you are John Wynne, I know you."

A rather noticeable shadow came over the heavy, compelling face.

"I am John Wynne," he said.

Robin repressed a desire to shout. "Delivered into my hands," he thought. "Ten minutes with John Wynne—if he will ever warm up to me—will teach me more than a thousand years of books and classes and professors!" Aloud he said, with a certain delightful but dignified deference,

"Thank you. I have always wanted to meet you, Mr. Wynne, although I hardly dared hope you really existed. I suppose you are at once the inspiration and the despair of all struggling young playwrights like myself. My name is Robert Hood, sir, and I bless the Fate which threw me into your river and gave me an opportunity I have often longed for."

The older man smiled a little, half in compunction, half in envy;

"Robert Hood? And you write?"

"I try," said Robin gaily,—“how hard, God alone knows. But I have had a one-act play accepted—that was in London, and before the War—and now I am back in my own country trying to write the 'Great American Drama, and by no means succeeding.'"

Wynne, rather abruptly, sat down on the couch beside his guest, reached for a silver box of cigarettes, offered them and, knees crossed and arm across the back of the couch, faced Robin, thoughtfully.

"Tell me something of yourself," he said. "It

is so long since I have had human contacts—and I have spoken, until now, to no man who went through the War. Tell me of that.”

Robin frowned.

“A large order,” he said, “perhaps you’d put me up for the night, sir?” He laughed and then said, more seriously, “it was just—war. Not as bad as some paint it, not as idealistic as others would have us believe. The experience remains apart from all things in a man’s mind . . . it seems unconnected with the past and alien to the present. As an aviator, perhaps I saw the most romantic side of the whole shindig, certainly, in a way, the most interesting and carefree. It was grim sport, but it was great sport. . . .” He broke off, astonished at the expression on Wynne’s face.

“An aviator!” said Wynne. “Good God!”

“Why not?” asked Robin, lightly. “I had a mechanical turn, good sight, a spirit of adventure; and I came out, as you see me, unscathed. I’m not an ace or anything like that, just one of hundreds, lucky to be alive, glad to have a chance at dying, and sound in wind and every limb.”

“I was thinking of your parents,” said Wynne slowly. “If I had had a son . . .”

He stopped again and Robin looked a little grave.

“There was my mother, of course,” he said. “It was very hard on her. I’m all she has; my father died when I was very young.”

"So you write plays," said Wynne, with his curious irrelevancy. "Tell me about them."

And Robin was still telling when Pedro, reluctant and suspicious, brought the armful of dry and ironed garments to him.

"Good Lord!" said Robin genuinely embarrassed, "it's almost dark! How I must have bored you!"

He escaped into the other room, his heart extraordinarily light, and dressed. Wynne, during his absence, never moved, except to throw the stub of a cigarette into the fire. When Robin returned, he was still sitting there, immobile.

"I'm ready," said Robin, "and I'm no end grateful."

Wynne rose.

"Come again," he said. "Come whenever you want to. But come alone."

"Thank you," Robin answered, "I'll come, if I may."

He wanted to shout. Already that keen flame which was John Wynne's mind had set a fire singing in his own brain. Already that tangle in the first act had been straightened out by half a dozen critical words. "I'll come," said Robin again, on a happy breath, "if you're sure you won't regret it."

His dark eyes were anxious, and the blue ones looking into them suffered a sudden, strange softening.

"I think now," Wynne replied, and then, amazingly, "perhaps. But it doesn't matter. Bring

me your plays—and,” he said, smiling for the first time, a smile of almost piercing sweetness, “your first love affairs. They’ll make your plays—or mar them.”

To his extreme rage, Robin felt the clear color rise into his face.

“A girl!” said Wynne, and it seemed to Robin that there was a burden of pity in the tone, “a girl!”

“*The Girl*,” said Robin bravely, hatless on the doorstep, for his cap was somewhere in the river. “Goodby, sir, and thank you. And I’ll be back.”

He reached the bank, Wynne beside him, untied the canoe, stepped in and pushed off. Dimly Robin saw Pedro haunting the fast-falling shadows, a sinister figure; more clearly he perceived—and long after it was lost to view—the heavy outline of John Wynne, standing motionless on the dock, arms behind his broad back, eyes bent, it seemed to Robin, searchingly upon himself. At the bend in the river he waved his paddle and saw, through the dusk, the lift of a hand. But Wynne still stood there and made no move to go. It seemed to Robin he would always be standing there, that he would find him there when he came back.

CHAPTER VI

ROBIN WAITS NO LONGER, AND JERRY GIVES A PARTY

*Build love a sturdy house. Bar fast the door;
Thieves haunt the night; draw down the secret
blinds,
And leave no chink whereby your light escapes;
Build well, build strong, the very winds have hands
And voices which destroy. Yet you have built
In vain, in vain, if you have built alone.*

It was really John Wynne who unlocked the door of Robin's heart, walked in, and precipitated a proposal which took place in the rose garden of Adams House the following evening.

"Women matter," John Wynne had said that hot August afternoon, "tremendously,—or rather, the right woman does. If you've found her, clasp her close. Don't lose her, not for a minute. I don't mean loss as one usually translates the term—loss by estrangement or death—but the loss ninety-nine percent of us suffer; you can't put it into words, it's intangible, an enemy in the dark. Sometimes just when you're happiest . . . it's letting things slide, taking them for granted with some people. Other times you lose her with a word or by a gesture or an attitude; and you don't realize

it for years. She may live on by your side until she dies, or you die, may bear your children, keep your house, share your life; but you've lost her, forever. *I know.*"

Robin had gone home, obsessed with the idea that Elaine was already lost to him. So he asked her the very next evening, under a perfectly aware moon, asked her as they walked down the garden path together, eagerly, and all at once, like a boy.

"You're mine, aren't you, Elaine? Tell me so; I love you so much!"

Elaine, startled out of her composure, raised misty eyes to his, withdrawing a little from the reach of his hungry arms, a white nymph, half in flight. But her eyes were kind and Robin caught at her slender hand.

"You'll marry me?" he stated rather than asked. "Soon?"

He kissed her, not her lips, but the cool and sweet scented cheek she turned to him, and then, her chin in his strong hand, he kissed her mouth. "Soon?" Robin repeated, huskily and low.

Elaine looked troubled.

"But I couldn't get ready," she said, "not for months." Robin, all laughter and rapture and a wonderful tenderness, swept her again into his clasp. "As soon as possible, then," he said firmly.

He took her to the children's swing, a two-seated affair, green and on a standard, back of the garden, and sat there with her and talked in snatches for an hour. Their life would be very wonderful

—they would travel—he would buy the house next door—they would go up to town for all the plays—oh, Elaine, Elaine, a dream come true—

“We might live in town,” suggested his fiancée, “and have the house here for summer, and your mother could visit us. . . .”

Robin looked puzzled.

“But she’ll *live* with us, of course,” he said. “She loves you, Elaine, and she only has me, you know. Elaine,” said Robin, rather cold at heart for all his singing look, “surely you won’t mind—Mother?”

She looked at him clearly in the moonlight—he could see her smile—and touched his hand.

“Why no,” said Elaine. “I’m sure we’d all be very happy together—I just thought . . .”

She didn’t finish. Robin had her close again; his own quite incorrect reading of her mind had made him wonderfully happy.

“But we *will* be alone,” he said, “often. And mother isn’t like other people. You’ll soon discover that, darling.”

It was late when they left the garden.

“I’m going to tell your father now,” said Robin. “Will you come in, dearest, or wait for me here?”

Elaine said she would rather wait, she had so much to think over.

And that was how it happened that when Robin, exultant Robin, was facing Mr. Adams in the ugly living room; when Laurel, with a half-stifled exclamation, had slipped from the piano bench and

up to her room; when Mrs. Adams, dropping stitches in her knitting, was kissing the new son: Elaine was standing at the white gate, looking dreamily into the shadows across the street. She was happy, calmly, wholly happy. She cared for Robin; he was the very nicest man she knew, and the life she would live with him appealed to her. She liked her little pedestal. . . .

Something stirred in the shadows across the way, stepped into the full light of the arc lamp opposite. Elaine was standing at the white gate, looking der, "different." . . . For an instant the two held one another's eyes . . . Elaine had an impression of a glance darker and brighter than Robin's, of dark hair with silver at the crest, of a thin face, sombre and inquiring. And then she heard her name and turned to see Robin running toward her.

"All's well, sweetheart," he said, and took her hand. "Come on in and be kissed—but first, right here.

He kissed her, laughing, and Elaine protested. "Robin! Out here? Any one might be passing and see!"

"Well, why not? Let 'em! They'll be green with envy. . . . What's there to be ashamed of? You're not really angry, are you, Elaine?"

She was, just a little, but he made his peace as they went up the path together. But while Mrs. Adams cried over her and Mr. Adams cleared his throat and grew redder than ever, while Laurel

crept downstairs to give her hand to Robin and to kiss her cousin and wish her happiness in the soft, beautiful voice with the grey eyes shining and deep, Elaine wondered if the man across the street had seen.

He had, and as he was staying at the Inn, it was not difficult to make inquiries. And it was the Flapper who, indirectly, enlightened him.

She had been playing tennis with Jerry one late afternoon, walking back to the Country Club for tea, they met Etienne de Gabriac coming in from the links. The young Frenchman was very well liked at the Inn; his credentials were as unimpeachable as his manners; he had been born of an American mother; he had money, genius and a romantic background, and would have been much exploited if he had allowed it. But de Gabriac had come to Stonystream to rest for several months. He was to begin a concert of the States in the late fall and he had no intention of being lionized briefly by a number of well-meaning, overdoing people. He was courteous to all, expansive to none. Of them all, the Flapper most amused him, and he had a sincere regard for the carefully concealed brain of Mrs. Van Wyck. She had seen possibilities in him, had relinquished them after a three days' acquaintance, and resigned herself to a very pleasant acquaintance with a man who, she regretfully wrote her dearest friend, had the makings of the ideal son-in-law.

"Somewhere," said de Gabriac in his faultless

English, "somewhere in this town there lives a most beautiful girl. Who is she?"

"Elaine Adams," said Jerry without hesitation, and the Flapper remarked, on the heels of this statement, "the Ice Queen."

"I thought so," said de Gabriac to the Flapper, and then, to Jerry, "you know her, Mr. Jones?"

"Since we were knee-high," Jerry answered with a gloom he could not quite manage to feel; there was too much warming red hair just at his shoulder and a slim little hand on his arm, "she's a school-mate of mine."

"How charming for you," said de Gabriac earnestly, and then, with a slight hand on Jerry's unattached arm, "I see I am too late by a number of years. But—if it could be arranged, my friend—?"

They had reached the wide shallow steps of the Club, and Jerry, mounting, turned to say,

"It could be, but you're too late by a number of days. Miss Adams has just announced her engagement."

He spoke with a sort of sombre satisfaction, and Jane, clutching at his arm, exclaimed in italics.

"Not *really*! You didn't tell me! Oh, Jerry, how *mean* of you! To that romantic Hood person, of course! *Now* perhaps you'll let me meet him. I've been *dying* to for weeks! Jerry, *do* give a party and ask the bunch!"

"Party!" echoed Jerry blankly, and looked at de Gabriac who, a smile somewhere back of his Latin eyes, nodded gravely.

"I think Miss Van Wyck's suggestion most excellent," he responded, "only—I am included?"

"You bet," said Jerry heartily. It was evident that de Gabriac was much attracted by Elaine. Jerry didn't quite put it that way, but that is what it amounted to, and from some strange depth of masculine malice, Jerry was not inimical to watching another benighted male lift his eyes in vain to the far shining of a star. Also, with Robin safely ticketed and disposed of, he was not unanxious to exhibit the Flapper as his discovery . . . no new star, perhaps, but surely a comet.

With this in mind, Jerry approached his father. Certainly, had it been left to Jerry, the hardware business would have suffered. His mornings were devoted to business, it is true, and his Sundays and Saturday afternoons had always been his own. Of late, however, weekday afternoons had been spent far, far from the detested counter. But oddly enough, Mr. Jones made no objection. Mrs. Jones was an invalid and read the society columns. Mr. Jones was not, inwardly, unsusceptible to socially registered names. It pleased them both that Jerry, uncollegiate and village Jerry, should have attained the heights to which the Van Wycks belonged, if only briefly. And so, when Jerry spoke of obligations and hospitality rendered and not returned, Mr. Adams, after several clearings of a chronically rusty throat, rose, unlocked a drawer, and tendered his only son a very substantial bill, with the admonition to "do things up brown."

On the following Saturday a group of young people had tea at the Country Club—tea and dancing. Mrs. Van Wyck, wearier than ever, chaperoned, and there were present: Monsieur Etienne de Gabriac, the world famous violinist whose War record was a matter of history; Mr. Worthington Taylor, the middle-aged bachelor of Hill Crest, sponsor for de Gabriac; Miss Elaine Adams and fiancé, Mr. Hood; Miss Laurel Dale; three extra and negligible, eligible men; Mr. Jones, the somewhat tongued-tied host, and Jane, the Flapper, who did the honors, most of the talking, and considerable of the eating and dancing.

Elaine, between Robin and Mr. Taylor, with fresh water-lilies in her cool, green belt and their counterfeits in her shady, floppy hat, said very little. She didn't have to. And Etienne, opposite, looked discreet volumes and talked of music to Laurel, whom he found most sympathetic. Robin was shining with pride and was frankly amused by the Flapper-antics, and Jerry was overcome with the knowledge that he was, according to Mrs. Van Wyck, the perfect host. It was curious, the real affection that weary lady cherished for the scion of a hardware shop. If one had delved deeply into her spotless past, one would have discovered that the first eighteen years of that lady's life had been happily spent in a second Stonystream in another state. She had married New York, the name of Van Wyck, and an authentic, simon-pure position. Mr. Van Wyck had obligingly died some five years

before, of hardening of the arteries, and his widow was free to spend his money and uphold the Van Wyck tradition. But some lingering memory of that other village, maple-shaded and serene, inclined her toward Jerry Jones. If anything came of it—well, Jane could marry where she pleased, and there was plenty of money. The tired eyes saw much, and with the exception of de Gabriac, Mrs. Van Wyck had seen no man whom she would have willingly called son-in-law in her own immediate circle. But de Gabriac was clearly not for Jane. . . .

The tea party serving as a wedge, de Gabriac became a constant caller at Adams House—as much on Mrs. Adams as on Laurel, as much on Laurel as on Elaine. Robin liked him, Mrs. Hood fell charmingly in love with him, Laurel was positively expansive in her praises, and Elaine said nothing. But he soon became a familiar figure, and later, a member of the family, for on his third encounter with Laurel he said, suddenly,

“Do you know, Miss Dale, either I have met you in a previous incarnation or we are old friends? Your aunt tells me you have lived much abroad. For nights I have lain awake and pondered. Now I remember. Remember, too, and remember without my telling you!”

Laurel, at the piano, looked at him as he leaned over the case and smiled into her eyes. She shut them and thought—de Gabriac—Etienne. . . .

“Think well!” he said.

Suddenly it came to her and she sprang up, the sheet of music drifting to the floor, her eyes dancing and her hands out-stretched.

"The French boy," said Laurel, "the boy who killed the centipede in Cuba and laughed when I cried and then gave me his handkerchief!"

It was true. And it had happened the year the Fleet went around the world, when Laurel was thirteen. She and her mother had been in Cuba, following the Fleet where they could, and young de Gabriac had been there too, with his father who had big sugar interests in the Guantanamo district. She wondered now that the name had not been more familiar; it had been familiar, of course, but she had attributed the fact to much reading of that name between the years 1914 and 1918. And there had been quite a newspaper flurry when de Gabriac had come to Stonystream to rest and prepare for his first concert tour since the War had interrupted and almost ended his metoric career.

Elaine, coming in, found them thus, hands clasped and smiling. She stopped in the doorway, her breath a little short.

"We're old friends," said Laurel. "Isn't it remarkable, Elaine, after all these years?"

She explained; de Gabriac explained. His eyes were on Laurel, but they saw Elaine,—they read her and they dropped to hide the curious expression half triumph, half pity, which came into them.

"How nice for you both," said Elaine lightly, and left the room.

Laurel turned back to the piano. She hadn't wanted to sing, but she would sing now for this man who had brought back her childhood to her again, her happy, careless, footloose childhood. . . .

When she had finished . . .

"It is a beautiful voice, Laurel," de Gabriac said—"I may call you that for old times' sake?—a beautiful voice, natural, true, temperamental. You must have lessons: have you had any at all?"

"A few," she answered, "here and there, from half a dozen different teachers, before my parents died. But I have not been able to go on with it. I have a home here with my uncle, they have been so kind to me—you can't imagine how kind—and I have enough money of my own to clothe myself, so it isn't all charity. But I couldn't ask for lessons, nor afford them myself. And I didn't want to; I don't care about it any more."

"Oh, but you must," said de Gabriac, sitting down and facing her on the piano bench, "you must! It will mean everything to you. You can sing out your heartaches, my little friend, you can sing your secrets; you can bring yourself balm and delight and you can bring delight and balm to others. It is the greatest gift, the shortest lived. Somehow you must go on with it, Laurel: some day you will need it."

Laurel looked at him from under her lashes, half frightened, half trustful. She liked him so much, he belonged to her happiest period of life, he was as she would have wanted her brother to be. He

seemed so wise for all his youth. She looked at the silver-streaked hair, the young, rather stern face and the eyes which had seen much suffering. It came over her suddenly that she would like to put her head down on Etienne's de Gabriac's shoulder and cry her heart out. . . .

Laurel, striking a chord, smiled a little at her own fancy. She glanced once at the thoughtful man beside her and lifted her lovely voice. It was Brahms she sang, dark music, the wonderful "*Sapphische Ode*." Robin, coming in from the porch in search of Elaine, thought he had never heard Laurel sing so stirringly. His heart quickened a little as, unseen, he listened. . . .

"We did not make war on *that*," commented the Frenchman, nodding toward the sheet of music. "And you have a voice which, trained, is the perfect Wagnerian voice. I would like to hear you, say in ten years, sing *Isolde*."

"Once," said Laurel, "I heard it sung. Father had a leave and we went to Baireuth. It was too wonderful for words. I would not care to hear it again," said Laurel, unconscious of how much the unsaid word might mean to the quick intelligence beside her.

"Not yet," he said, and was silent for a moment then, "Laurel, in October I bury myself to practice with an accompanist. But if you would care to accompany me now and your kindly relatives would not mind, it would be pleasant to make music together sometime, would it not?"

"It would be," Laurel answered, steadily and gladly, "a very great honor, Monsieur de Gabriac."

"Not Etienne?" he laughed, "why not? We have music and memories in common—surely you have not so wholly forgotten the centipede."

Elaine and Robin, out in the garden, heard them laugh through the open windows.

"They seem very friendly," said Robin lazily, "perhaps it's a match."

Elaine's eyes widened.

"Oh, surely not," she said, "but it seems that they have met before." She halted and then closed her mouth on words she would have spoken, and Robin laughed.

"Why not?" said he. "He's a splendid fellow and certainly Laurel deserves the best."

"I hate international marriages," said Elaine with a curious vehemence which surprised Robin, "and Laurel is much too shy and simple to fit in the sort of life Mr. de Gabriac must lead. It would *never* do," she said firmly.

"Well, don't get excited over it, darling," said Robin, easily. "I was merely matchmaking. Listen! Your ring will be ready today, and we should have it by tomorrow. How about it?"

Elaine flushed.

"Not really?" she asked. "Oh, don't be so stupid and secretive, Robin! Tell me about it!"

"Wait and see," he counselled, and would have added more, but at that moment Laurel and de

Gabriac came out on the veranda and hailed them. When the four had met, Laurel said,

"You tell them, Etienne!"

"No, you!"

They were flushed, laughing, excited. Elaine, very pale, looked from one to the other; Robin, curious and interested, caught Laurel by the shoulder.

"Out with it!"

"We are . . ."

"She is . . ."

And finally Etienne said coolly, "Laurel and I are forming an alliance." He raised a hand at Robin's exclamation and continued smoothly, "a musical Entente. She plays my accompaniments for the rest of my stay here; I practice on the violin, and the rest of you leave the house in self-defence. It is all settled; we have asked permission of Mrs. Adams, and to-morrow we begin."

"Isn't it splendid?" asked Laurel with glowing eyes. And Robin chuckled.

"Is *that* all," he inquired in mock dismay, "we thought . . ."

But Elaine laid her hand on his arm. Her color had come back threefold, and she had never looked more lovely.

"Indeed it is," she said charmingly. "But you will not be able to drive us away! You must reconcile yourself to an audience."

Both men were lunching at Adams House and

the four went in together at the sound of the gong. At the dining room door, de Gabriac, finding himself alone with Elaine, murmured, "You were lily-pale a moment since . . . and no one saw but I. . . ." There was a question in his eyes and Elaine, saying something about the heat, slipped past him into the dining room. De Gabriac, watching her, wondered if ever roses had grown on so fair a field.

That night his conscience hurt him.

CHAPTER VII

DIAMONDS AND PEARLS

*Oh, heart, thou art defenceless! Thou art torn
By little arrows . . . weariness and scorn.
How shalt thou bear the larger rents? Ah, go,
Defenceless heart and beg . . . and tell her so!*

When Elaine's ring arrived from the city, Robin put the blue leather box in his pocket, got out the car, called for his fiancée, and took her driving. Several miles out of Stonystream a small, fresh-water lake had chosen to dream away the months in a green setting of trees, under a sky which to-day was like a blue mirror. This was Water-lily Lake and seemed somehow to Robin peculiarly to belong to the girl beside him.

He parked the car, helped Elaine out, and walked with her to a clearing in the trees where soft moss and delicate ferns grew, and a fallen tree obligingly made a rustic bench for many lovers.

He took the box from his pocket and held it a moment in his hand.

"It's not the conventional ring, darling," Robin said, "but it looked like you—"

He opened the box and held it toward her mutely, his eager eyes intent upon her face.

The ring was a single, very beautiful pearl, set in a slim platinum hoop, a wonderful thing, creamy white and pure. . . .

But Elaine loved diamonds.

She took it from his hand and a shadow of disappointment clouded the serene blue of her eyes.

"It's beautiful, Robin," she said, rather lifelessly.

"You don't like it!"

She was trying it on, and at his tone she raised her eyes to his.

"Oh, but I do," she said earnestly, "only—pearls mean tears, don't they? And so many people wear imitation, single stones, set like this . . . ?"

Robin took her hand, took the ring from it and looked at it for a second.

"I should have asked you," he said, unhappily, "but somehow this seemed so like you—I thought, I hoped, you'd care for it. . . ."

Elaine, knowing she had hurt him, was immediately on the defensive. Robin was so childish. If he had only *asked* her, as other men asked their affianced wives. . . . She would have loved to have gone to town and picked out her own ring. Mrs. Hood had suggested it.

"There's nothing to make a fuss about, Robin," she said, a little coolly. "It is a very pretty ring, of course, but I had imagined you would bring me a solitaire. Diamonds are the usual things, and I've never had a diamond."

Robin put the ring in the box. . . .

"You'll have your diamond, Elaine," he said

quietly. "Mother is going to the city the end of this week. She would love to have you with her, of course, and you can pick the ring out yourself. That will be much better all around. As for this . . ."

He raised his hand, but Elaine, horrified, caught at his arm.

"Robin! Don't! How perfectly absurd!"

"Well," asked Robin, "why not? You don't want it. It seems to me the only thing to do—just chuck it away."

But Elaine had the blue box in her own clasp.

"I never heard of anything so childish," she said firmly. "You can take it back to the shop and change it. It would be a perfectly crazy thing to do, to throw a valuable ring away. . . . I never heard of such a thing, Robin."

He looked at her a minute and smiled, a little curiously.

"Very well," he said, "since you insist on being—practical—for us both, I will not consign it to a watery grave. Give it to me, Elaine, and I will take it to mother and explain."

And that is how it happened that Elaine, inwardly excited, outwardly cool, spent three days in New York with Mrs. Hood, at the Plaza, and returned home sparkling with triumph and her solitaire. Those were days of revelation for Robin's mother, who had joyfully embraced the opportunity to be alone with Elaine, to grow into surer knowledge of her. For above everything, Anne Hood passion-

ately desired to be, not mother-in-law, but mother-in heart to the girl of her son's choice. She found Elaine sweet, submissive and unfathomable, perhaps because there was nothing to fathom, no depths to sound, and she locked her disappointment away in a corner of her soul which was the mute repository for other disappointments, and rejoiced in the obvious blessings of Elaine's undisputed beauty, her serenity and her breeding. Once, the evening of their arrival, Anne Hood had touched tentatively on the subject of the ring.

"I understand," she said, "that every girl wants a solitaire—it is the conventional symbol. But, Elaine dear, forgive me, it is not always wise to reject the choice of a man who loves you. Later, surely, you may be able to direct that choice, but the first gift means so much, and men are sentimental creatures at heart."

Elaine widened her eyes. They were dining, and Elaine was not wholly unaware of the attention she was attracting.

"But, Mother Hood," she answered, "Robin said he wanted me to have what I wanted. . . . If he had consulted me in the first place this would never have happened. I thought, of course, that one was *always* engaged with diamonds—there is a superstition about pearls, you know—but Robin *insisted* on being so secretive about the ring. I never dreamed. . . . Anyway," she ended, happily, "when I explained it to him he understood. And I am so glad that I was able to have this

little trip with you," concluded Elaine, prettily.

Mrs. Hood beckoned for her check, signed, and repressed a sigh.

"Very well," she said quietly, "we will go to Tiffany's tomorrow morning."

It was a curious coincidence that the two women met Etienne de Gabriac there. Elaine saw him first and Mrs. Hood, turning, saw first Elaine's face and then met the dark, interesting glance of the young Frenchman. Something in her very intuitive spirit spoke softly to her, and for a moment she was appalled, dismayed and, most oddly, exultant. She greeted de Gabriac and turned back to the laden case of jewels.

"I came up this morning," de Gabriac was explaining to Elaine; "my sister, from whom I had a letter last week, intrusted me with a commission for her. How fortunate for me that I should meet you. Mrs. Hood will give me the pleasure of offering you both luncheon, will she not?"

There seemed no reason for refusing, so they lunched together at the Ritz, and Etienne was most entertaining. He told them about his sister, his only near relative, now married to an Englishman attached to the British Embassy in Paris; described, lightly enough, the brilliant and crowded life of the city of his heart and birth and watched Elaine's eyes as he talked. So did Mrs. Hood.

Elaine had her ring, as, miraculously, it had not necessitated alteration, and Etienne watched it shining on her long, white hand.

"Diamonds are your stone," said he; "they become you admirably," and added in a lower tone, "cold, bright, pure—with somewhere a fire at the heart. Yes, I would have chosen diamonds for you, Miss Adams."

His slightly subdued tone did not, and had not been intended to shut Mrs. Hood out. Instead he glanced at her gravely, pausing a moment as if waiting for her agreement, and she slowly nodded. Elaine, her eyes on the stone which was white as fire in its lacework setting of platinum and smaller stones, spoke abstractedly.

"Robin said pearls were my stones—"

Etienne leaned back, one slim, musician's finger beating unconscious time on the table to the camouflaged African challenge of the orchestra.

"Not pearls," he said. "Pearls are too—soft, and they are moody. Not pearls, Miss Adams, with all due respect to your fiancé."

The remainder of the luncheon hour was unimportant, but Robin's mother returned to the Plaza, thoughtful. She liked de Gabriac, and it was clear to her that de Gabriac was clear-sightedly and wholeheartedly—if such a thing were possible—in love with Elaine. The loyal mother in her resented it; for Robin's sake she was hurt, jealous, angry; and yet, other instincts of maternity approved and knew an unconfessed upspringing of hope. It was difficult to disentangle the confusion of emotions—they were as skeins of many colored silks, intri-

cately snarled. She gave up the task and set about entertaining Elaine, convinced, from her own experience, that some day she would chance on the key knot and see the threads orderly and smooth once more.

Etienne went back to Stonystream on the same train with Mrs. Hood and Elaine. He was charmingly concerned for their comfort, and the short trip seemed even shorter than usual. On the station platform Robin met them.

"How splendid that you were in town, too, de Gabriac," Robin greeted him cordially. "You met on the train?"

Mrs. Hood explained.

"Fine!" said her son, "I'm glad you and Elaine had a cavalier to play around with. Thanks, de Gabriac. No, don't look for a taxi—I've the car here and will be happy to drop you at the Inn. Get in, everybody!"

Elaine was put into the front seat with Robin, Mrs. Hood and de Gabriac in the back. They drove slowly, for Robin was engrossed in his fiancée's bright eyes as she displayed her ring and grew very animated in her enthusiasm. But the other passengers were silent; de Gabriac sat back, a shade pale, and very much occupied with his own thoughts. Before they reached the Inn he roused himself from what he felt was a discourtesy and spoke of casual matters to his companion, mentioned that he planned an informal musical hour

with Laurel on a not far distant evening, hoped Mrs. Hood would be there . . . and then said, suddenly.

"I would like to talk to you, Mrs Hood, alone. And yet I feel that I cannot ask you to listen to me. Even that passive *rôle* might, in your conception, tarnish your natural allegiance. . . ." He stopped for a second, while she looked at him, astonished into silence, and then, smiling most engagingly, he added, "but I have already said too much!"

They were at the Inn. Etienne kissed the hand of the older woman, thanked Robin, and bowed, a trifle formally, to the girl in the front seat, and stood, bareheaded, on the steps until they had driven off. Then he turned and went, rather wearily, to his own room.

He sat up late into the night and faced his heart. There was no question of his love for Elaine. He did not idealize her, he did not set her on a pretty pedestal, he saw her as she was and loved her. There was her beauty to love, her dignity, her gracious, uniform sweetness. All these he loved, poetically and passionately. Also, he saw her small unawakened heart, her tight little middle-class mind, her rather conscious sexlessness. He approved the latter: in a wife too much emotion was not desirable, thought Latin Etienne. What normal seeds of warm womanhood were innate in her could be cultivated and made to flower for the right gardener; but Etienne very clearly saw that Robin, Robin with his ideals, his

worship, his blindness, might endeavor all his life and yet fail to awaken in Elaine anything other than placid and pleasant affection. Not all Robin's encompassing adoration could compel more. Elaine would stop upon her pedestal, secure, serene as any marble from the Louvre, a little superior, a little aloof, while Robin knelt before her and proffered her his heart as a sacrifice. But the man to win Elaine Adams to any semblance of unreasoning devotion, must stand on the firm ground with her, must make her look up, must know her through and through and love her for what she was, never for what she clearly was not.

There was nothing unscrupulous about Etienne de Gabriac. He did not argue to himself that he was the man to make Elaine happy and that, at the best, Robin could only drug her into a species of commonplace content. Nor did he put it to himself that Elaine, in the long run, would render Robin miserable. These things were true, but they were not excuses. He merely thought, "I love her" and on that simple basis he could not step in and snatch her away from the man who had taken from her her promise to marry him. For Etienne knew, with his merciless French logic, his inbred subtilty and his vision which was undimmed by his dreams, that, given the same situation and another girl, he could not be induced to break in, like a robber in the night, from altruistic motives. No one steals out of unselfishness, out of duty to his fellow-man.

And then there was Laurel. Etienne was very tender toward Laurel. It was certain that, of all her friends, he most clearly appreciated her. And he had seen very deep into her heart, deeper than she knew. Yet Laurel could not provide another excuse, not for Etienne who was a soldier and a gentleman.

But he warned her, several nights later, when they were making music for the Adams; the Hoods, Jerry, the Flapper, Mrs. Van Wyck, and one or two other friends. Etienne had played for the better part of the hour and, had he looked, he might have been tempted to warn Elaine, who sat with her hands in her lap and a new light struggling to birth in her eyes . . . but he did not look, he was too intent on the singing wood under his cheek. . . . Later, Laurel sang, to his accompaniment on the old, inadequate piano, sang her heart out in a little hackneyed French song, with her eyes half closed and her face quite white. And Etienne said, very softly, "Take care, my little friend. You are singing too well. . . ."

She almost stumbled, but recovered herself and finished her song of love without reward and death without remembrance. But when it was over and Etienne rose from the piano, she made the strangest little unconscious gesture of hopelessness, of defeat—and Etienne, looking, realized that, at the conclusion of his own part of the program, Elaine had slipped from the room and, followed by Robin, had gone into the garden.

To Robin, in the garden, Laurel's song must have come very dimly to ears that were almost deaf to anything but the night wind and the soft breathing of the silent girl beside him.

CHAPTER VIII

ELAINE GOES GOLFING

*The soul that sees its failure and its sin
Is sorrowful—and strong;
The soul that banished trust and let doubt in
Dies hard—and long.*

The apple tree post-box, half full already, was the recipient of another letter. Not a long letter this time, just half a dozen broken sentences.

“Oh, Robin, she’s going to care for him—it doesn’t seem fair somehow. I think I can perfectly bear seeing you happy with her—but not unhappy—not that. Robin! It’s all so miserable and tangled—and I am wretched for you both—wondering where it will all end and how—”

Thus Laurel, grown a little pale and thinner these early September days, Laurel, who no longer sang “for company” and whose grey eyes were anxious and following. And not alone Laurel was burdened with presentiments and trouble. Anne Hood, in the house next door, was sleepless for many nights; Robin wore a perpetual crease between his brows and smoked more than was good for any man; most significant of all, the magic violin of Etienne de Gabriac was silent, lying, slender

and brown, in its plush-lined case, a reproach to its master. Alone, Elaine moved serenely through golden days and her mother, furiously sewing on trousseau garments, for the wedding day was set for early spring, seemed more myopic than usual. But Mr. Adams found time, between daily wholesale linen and Sunday golf, to remark, to the wife of his bosom;

"France, it strikes me that young frog-eater is hanging around here a lot—"

"Laurel," replied his France, reading his unspoken question by some sixth marital sense, and placidly combing her dull but still abundant hair before the mirror, "they have so much in common—music and all. He liked her, I think. And he seems a very nice young man, George, I am sure, although I can't say I care much for French people as a rule."

Mrs. Adams, by way of digression, had known just two persons answering this vague description, prior to Etienne's descent upon Adams House; a pallid female creature who "made" clothes; and a robust gentleman of Canadian-Indian ancestry, who spoke with an alleged "French accent" and sold canoes in Stonystream.—

"*Not* Laurel," contradicted Mr. Adams, firmly, struggling with a bootlace, "Elaine. And I'm sorry for Robin. De Gabriac fascinates the child. He appeals to her imagination," said Mr. Adams, with a flash of insight, "and she'll never really get to know him. What if she should throw Robin

over?" he inquired in a note of alarm and anger.

Mrs. Adams finished braiding her hair for the night and rose.

"Such a thing has never happened in my family," she remarked with some dignity, "nor in yours, either, as far as I know. Unless you forgot to tell me—I remember I had lived with you six years before you told me about Hettie, your own first cousin, eloping with that man from Kansas City—not that she wasn't happy with him—and *she* was never engaged before, to my knowledge. As for Elaine," she continued as Mr. Adams gazed patiently at her and waited for her to return to her ewe lamb, "I never heard of anything so ridiculous. As if she wouldn't tell her own mother if she had changed her mind. I think it's *your* imagination that is at work, George. Perhaps," she concluded, sensitively, "you think that I don't know my own daughter!"

Mr. Adams was silent. After the light was out however he turned in the big four poster, punched an inoffensive pillow and said:

"And perhaps you think *I* don't know Elaine! I admit I see very little of her, as I am merely her father and spend most of my time trying to support her. But what I know, I know. And I would like to hear Robin's personal opinion on the matter. Not that I have anything specific against de Gabriac," he added, generously, "from all I see of him, I judge him to be a very fine man. And he's not underhanded— But—"

He listened for an answer, in his heart desiring the reassurance he had appeared to scorn, but even breathing was his only answer and in the light of the following morning it seemed foolish to pursue the subject. Elaine was her own mistress. Very much so. And, as such, she must work out her own problems. But something down deep in her father's heart whispered to him that it was, after all, a thousand pities, that fathers had so little leisure in which to become acquainted with their beautiful daughters—and—what *did* Robin really think?

Robin thought a good deal. The devil of it was that he liked de Gabriac. After all, there was nothing that he could lay his hand on, nothing tangible. You can't concoct tragedy from a chance-seen look, a blush, a sudden pallor, can you? Not and keep a level head. And—drama from an unspoken word? Oh, but you can—level head or not, and Robin was a playwright and he knew that you can; knew the value of the thing unsaid, the weight of the thing forbidden. But he couldn't speak out, not really. Once, tentatively, he had tried, "isn't de Gabriac coming here a good deal, darling?" He remembered her answer and the honest—was it honest or cautious?—blue surrender of her eyes. "But, of course, Robin, he likes so much to practise with Laurel—and Laurel gets out so little—it is nice for her."

Ambiguous, veiled, careful. And with the fel-

low's own confounded delightful trick of translated French phrasing. Robin had grown rather angry and had used, without knowing, the very words Elaine's father had echoed, days later:

"Not Laurel! Elaine, it's not fair to encourage de Gabriac in his attentions to you. He is a splendid fellow, I agree with you there, I like him exceedingly. But you—you push liking too far. You are engaged to me—"

Then had come her quick defensive interruption:

"Are you accusing me of flirting with Mr. de Gabriac? I must say, Robin, if you can't trust me, if you think so lightly of me that such a thought could even enter your head; if I can't even be *courteous* to another man without a scene—"

Suddenly he was in the wrong, deep in it, pulling himself out . . . words were little, futile sticks with which he sought to extricate himself. But they broke in his grasp.

"Ah!" she had said with sudden anger, "how much worse you make it. Don't try. I know what you think of me now—"

A mist of tears in the blue eyes . . . kisses . . . pleas for pardon.

"Well, for God's sake," said Robin fiercely, to himself, re-living the scene as he paddled the canoe toward Winding River. "Why should I have been forced to apologize? Did I say anything? No, I didn't! Women are—well, women twist and turn and land you in the middle of it, on your knees, asking for forgiveness. Quibble and cry and with-

draw and you send to town for the gimcracks she wants and it's 'Take this, and please forgive me'—"

Robin was learning.

On this occasion of his weekly visit to the Hermit, in the bare living room which somehow spoke to him more clearly than any other room he had ever seen, Robin put a question:

"Are women ever honest, John Wynne?"

Wynne, grown brown with the passing of summer, and thin with work, smiled:

"You, too, Robin? No, my boy rarely. After all, why should they be? They have been taught through long centuries to dissemble. They have the harder part to play. The crystal clear honesty that is really honor is a very precious thing, if ever you find it. And only one in a thousand has it to give you. Otherwise—well, let us leave them their little evasions and mysteries, Robin. Don't make this mistake of trying to dissect them on the table of your intelligence and with the surgeons' weapons. Leave that to the novelist—who never gets much further than epidermis, for all his mouthings! *'Where the apple reddens, never pry—'*"

"*'Lest we lose our Eden, Eve and I,'*" Robin capped the quotation ruefully, adding, "but—if they can't give you that—it, well, it seems like second best."

"No," denied Wynne, "not that. Just their little armor, Robin, pitiful defenses, tiny barrages, absurd smoke screen. Sometimes it is all merely to

try and protect mental privacies, to which we are all entitled to, from the world. Mind you, I am speaking of the small reticences, infinitesimal withdrawals, white or even grey falsehoods and subtleties, not of larger treacheries or planned, motivated deceptions."

"Oh, I didn't mean that," said Robin, eagerly, "I meant, well, just evading the issue, putting you in the wrong when your whole mind and logic and everything about you knows that you are right. Little things."

"Of course." Wynne smiled again, "little things."

Wynne was getting to know Elaine, too. Although he had so steadfastly refused to meet her, very gently and plausibly, "you know how I hate meeting people, Robin. Later, perhaps,—some day, of course."

Before Robin left, Wynne said to him, apropos of nothing in their conversation:

"Robin, if things ever break badly for you, come back here to me and I'll tell you something. You're too happy to hear it now."

"Happy?" Robin asked himself, in silence, "excited, stirred, uncertainly balanced between height and depth, thrilled, yes—but—*happy*?"

He left the mental question unanswered. In a flare of affectionate curiosity and a sudden violent wish that he could honestly repudiate, within himself, the suggestion that anything could ever "break badly" he asked, impulsive and eager:

"I say, sir, were you ever—did you . . . ?"

He stopped, coloring to the roots of his hair. He had been on the verge of committing the unpardonable sin, and he apologized for it in the next breath although nothing had actually been said.

"I didn't mean—I sincerely ask your pardon, Mr. Wynne."

Wynne rose, walked to the fireplace and faced his guest, his great head thrust forward a little. A log blazed on the hearth, the room was dim in the falling dusk and the central vitality of the flames made him seem extraordinarily big as he stood there, rather grim, but not offended or unfriendly.

"I know you didn't. You were going to say, 'did you ever love a woman?' And I will answer you this far. Yes. Love? It wasn't love, however; it was sheer, insane adoration."

The heavy eyebrows almost met, his lids drooped for a moment over the fire in his eyes. Robin, listening, his hands between his knees and his face alight with sympathy and wonder, marvelled that any woman could have cast aside as worthless so immense a gift; for he guessed that she had not accepted it.

"I loved her," said John Wynne, as if to himself, "and she loved me. But when the test came, her love wasn't big enough, that was all. Therefore—I am as you see me."

Robin was silent, but the arrogant youth of him

dwelt, with a touch of scorn, at the amazing spectacle of a man who could allow an unstable woman to set him, in his rebellion, apart from his fellows. The keen eyes, lifted now and bent on him, accurately read his thoughts.

"You think that a confession of weakness, Just to allow one little woman person to smash things up? Perhaps it is. Perhaps, too, the fault was never entirely hers. I was not an easy man to live with, even in my youth. I demanded, I compelled, I broke where I could not bend, I broke her and then myself, and so I went away. I went away," he repeated, very low, "and my love went with me."

The room was very still. Only the fire spoke, made known its voice and its incessant vitality. And outside the trees bowed to the superior will of a sudden, high wind.

Ten minutes later, when Robin was entirely wreathed in blue pipe smoke, Wynne spoke abruptly.

"I'll light up here. Let's get on with your last act, Robin. We'll work at the table—there are too many ghosts in this dim room."

Robin was late for dinner that night, he had left his canoe at Wynne's as the storm had definitely come to stay, and Pedro had driven him into Stonystream in a dilapidated runabout, behind a comatose horse. But the play was completed, ready for a final retyping, in shape for the last polish, and he read it that night to his mother, who sat pale and eager, in the living room next door to

Adams House and listened with no comment until the end.

When he had done, she rose from her chair and came over to him.

"It's big, Robin," she told him, "but it's never all you! You haven't lived that much, you don't know that much—not yet. There's psychology there that you have never dreamed of. It has crept in by itself, or else some one put it there—was it Mr. Wynne?"

Robin, exultant, sprang to his feet.

"I suppose so. I owe him everything," he said. "Mother, that's a great man. And he has suffered. If only I could do something for him, make up a little for what he has gone through. . . ."

Mrs. Hood did not smile. She considered her tall boy for a moment seriously.

"I think he must owe you something, too," she said, "and I know you can help him—by bringing him back, gradually, into touch with life and youth and joy again."

Robin walked to the window and looked out into the night. The wind had increased and now the rain fell, heavily, beating with dull, monotonous fingers against the roof of the veranda.

His mother's voice broke into his confused thoughts.

"Have you read the play to Elaine?"

"Not yet. I wanted to finish it first," he answered, conscious that he was making an excuse, not so much to his mother as to himself, "but I

can read it to her to-morrow, in this form. There's really very little to be done now, save paring off the rough edges."

"She'll be proud of you," said Mrs. Hood, confidently, "I am."

She kissed him and went to her room. Robin, climbing to his own sanctuary, looked from the hall window to the lights across the way. If he was truthful with himself at all, he must confess that Elaine had not seemed over interested in his play. That is, she had said she couldn't quite "see" the play as he told it. She would have to read it. Telling didn't make it "clear" to her somehow. It was like the blue prints of a house—she could make nothing of them, perhaps it was her own stupidity? On his quick denial, she had asked a number of questions. . . . Didn't plays—successful plays—make a great deal of money? Would his picture be in the papers? When the play finally went on, would they have a box—and perhaps supper afterwards?

The next day dawned blue and gold and sweetly cool after the storm. Robin, in the afternoon, went to Adams House. He had spent the morning in a fury of retouching. Here a shade deeper, here a shade lighter, one character made a little more emphatic, another toned down a trifle. . . .

He crossed the lawn gaily, and his mother watched him go. Her heart hurt her that morning. Robin walked just as his father had walked, with the same light, quick step, the same arrogantly

poised head, the same trick of hands. . . . She closed her eyes and heard that other, similar step come up the path of her dreams, and heard a voice . . . saw, too, the sunshine on the red brick walk and listened to a mocking bird swinging and singing in the tall pepper tree at the gate . . . the past was so much nearer than the present sometimes. . . . How many years since? Thirty? A thousand? Her heart contracted and she put out her hands, blindly, groping for the touch, the memory of which never failed to stir her, even now. and "Evan"—she asked across the years and silence—"Evan?"

There was no answer, save in her own heart. But he seemed so close to her always, just around the corner; a moment more, a little quieting of pulse and sense and surely she had reached him, held him safe.

Laurel, opening the door of Adams House to Robin, looked quaintly alarmed.

"But Elaine is out! Didn't she send you word? Etienne is giving her a golf lesson. Surely you knew—forgot? She said that we might join them for tea at the Club, if we cared to. Etienne sent word that they would get in about four-thirty.

"That's so. I had forgotten," said Robin, who had never known. But he couldn't let Elaine down, nor could he let Laurel see. . . .

His heart was hot with rebellion. Elaine had known that he wished to read her the play to-day. Very well, she would see that it didn't matter, her

lack of interest in his, Robin's play, and her sudden interest in his, de Gabriac's golf! Damn the fellow, thought Robin, but he couldn't really. No one could damn Etienne. A slow smile came into his eyes, brushing aside the veil of anger. He'd show Elaine, thought small-boy Robin!

"All right," he said cheerfully, "we can make it by then. Have you any spare time loose on the premises, Laurel? Could you capture it and give it to me? I'd like you to hear the play, if you care to."

Stars in the grey eyes, for Robin, then.

"Oh, I'd love it!" she cried, breathlessly, and then halted, "But—Elaine—?" she suggested, doubtfully, "wouldn't you rather wait?"

“Nope.” Robin was firm, “come along. Let’s go into the garden and sit in the swing. It’s as warm as anything now and I hate to be indoors. Never could acquire the house habit, anyway. Want a hat?”

Laurel didn't, and went as she was. This was riches, an unexpected gift, a finding of sudden treasure, over which to dream in darkest hours. They went to the swing, the battle-scarred, paintless, sacred swing. Robin, with a certain grim enjoyment for which he detested himself, had chosen that very spot, as an oblique method of revenge. And there, his low voice unhurried and with his audience sitting opposite him, leaning forward, her lips parted and her eyes on his face, he read his play—to Laurel.

It was after five when they finally reached the Country Club. Laurel with a timid, "I think—" and an explanation—had cleared up the one false note which Robin hadn't been able to hear and which somehow Wynne, himself and Anne had missed. Robin was in a state of fever, after she had said her hesitating little say and waited for his reply.

"That's it! By all the gods, you've hit it! How in the world . . . ?"

But Laurel was deprecatory.

"It's simple," she answered, with a funny, small wave of her hand. "I wonder your mother didn't see it. Perhaps she did, but thought you must know best. But a woman wouldn't say that, Robin—not what you have made that girl say. After all, she loved him and it couldn't matter to her, I mean essentially and down deep, that he didn't care for her. She just couldn't be a *cat*—about him! That's what you have made her. She's a minor character, I understand that, but if you had meant her to be scratchy and clawy in the first place, you wouldn't have allowed her that first sacrifice in the second act. If she loved him that little, she wouldn't have stepped aside; and if she had loved him enough to efface herself, she couldn't have tried to hurt things at the end for him. After all, just loving, really loving, is almost complete happiness, provided you love enough."

"You think so?" Robin looked at her curiously, as she faced him there, grave and flushed, so eager

to make him see, very young in her seriousness and her little, sudden wisdom.

"Oh, but I *know* so!" said Laurel, with shining eyes.

Robin, for the first time, commented to himself that the man whom Laurel would one day love would be an uncommonly lucky person. He hoped it wouldn't be de Gabriac? Surely, she was fond of de Gabriac and might be fonder? And that would be very bad indeed, for it was quite obvious to any one with eyes that de Gabriac— Well, thought Robin, leaving the silent sentence unfinished, his worst enemy would have to admit that the man had a way with him. . . .

They joined the golfers eventually and found that although late, they had not been missed. Elaine looked a little startled as they came up the long Club veranda, as if she had been, with violence, aroused from some secret dream. As Robin and Laurel sat down, exchanged greetings and gave their order, she plunged into a description of her first attempt at the magnificent game, and grew bright cheeked and laughing over her recital of failures and the one, inevitable, good shot. She played the eighteen holes all over again for her cousin and her betrothed. But de Gabriac, or so Robin fancied, seemed rather unusually quiet.

After a time,

"Robin read me his play," said Laurel, casually, putting two lumps of sugar in her second cup of tea. She never took more than one. Turning, she

saw Etienne's eyes on her, questioning, searching. How absurd, she thought, as if there could ever be a question—or an answer. . . .

But Robin was looking at Elaine. There was no shadow on her face, he saw with a sudden humiliation, and her voice rang true as she said, sincerely:

"How nice! You must read it to me, Robin, soon. Did you like it, Laurel?"

"Like it?" Laurel was roused to scorn, "Oh—but it's big. Wait till you hear it for yourself, Elaine—you are going to be so proud."

Elaine liked being "proud." She smiled at Robin charmingly, and touched his hand for a fleeting moment.

"Laurel's a wonder," said Robin, suddenly gay, "and she's helped me no end. Enormously, for a fact. Really, the play isn't mine at all, now. It is Laurel's and John Wynne's."

"How nice," remarked Elaine again, and de Gabriac said, gravely;

"You will let me hear it too—or read it, Hood, will you not? It would be an honor."

But it was Mrs. Hood who put the final touch of mystery on what, to Robin, had been a bewildering day. She heard him out, his tale of Laurel and the minor character who "mustn't be made a cat," and then said;

"You have always underestimated Laurel, dear. She has the clearest mind I have ever come in contact with and the finest, most sensitive honesty.

She saw, where none of us saw, a real flaw in characterization. But she must, some time, have suffered, in order to be able to see."

"Laurel? Suffer?" Robin was genuinely distressed. Fragments of stories she had told him of her early childhood, her gypsy girlhood, her double bereavement, came to him as an explanation. Lying in bed that night he turned his thoughts once more to Wynne and wondered if Wynne would not become very close to Laurel, once he knew her. Robin planned that some day they must meet, if by premeditated accident. "Finest, most sensitive honesty." If his mother was right, Laurel was one woman in a thousand, thought Robin, and wondered that it yet remained for a lover's eye to discover it. It was a pity that de Gabriac—well, kept his eyes elsewhere. But would Laurel be happy married to a foreigner? Robin pondered this, aware that he was match-making, aware too that he was making matches with mixed motives; and not alone from the simon pure desire to see his little friend next door married, appreciated and at peace. He thumped his pillow with an impatient hand and dismissed Laurel, de Gabriac, Wynne and the play from his mind. But that night he dreamed that he was all the characters in his own play, that John Wynne crouched in the prompter's box, and that Laurel was the audience with her two eyes like steady stars. As the curtain fell, and he came before it to take and acknowledge the applause of two hands, which, however, seemed to fill the whole

world with sound, he heard, as from a great distance, the cool, quiet voice of his fiancée, saying, "*How nice!*" Suddenly he was no longer on the stage, in a theatre, but in an orchard, reaching up to boughs heavy with scarlet fruit, and another voice, much bigger than all earth, was thundering in his ears, "*Where the apple reddens, never pry—*" Whose voice? His own? Wynne's? de Gabriac's? The apple slipped from his grasp, and he bent to recover it, strangely desperate, and woke.

His mother was leaning over him, anxiously speaking;

"You called, Robin; cried out. What is it, dear? Are you ill?"

He reassured her, sitting up in bed, his tousled dark head between his hands.

"Sorry. No, it was nothing. Just dreaming, Mummy."

The old, childish name stirred her. She looked very young in the half light of dawn, tall and slender in her trailing white garments.

"Dream true!" she bade him, out of "Peter Ibbetson," and left him.

But when he woke once more, with the sunlight on the floor in yellow pools of radiance, and all the birds in New England singing insanely just outside his open windows, he had not dreamed again.

CHAPTER IX

FLAPPER TRIUMPHANT

*Hold her quite gently that she may not know
How strong the clasp; she is too young to burn
With your young flame; and should she stir, let go
The arms that hold her. Wait. She will return!*

Labor day was over and done with, the public schools were open once more and simultaneously there was a wave of September heat, Nature's yearly, slightly malicious, practical joke on the school child, Stonystream Inn would be closed in ten days, the season would be past, and the Flapper, sitting on the white marble edge of the out-door swimming pool, trailed a disconsolate, pink toe in the clear, cool water. She wore a green Kellerman, belted in white, and her curly red hair was guiltless of a cap. Jerry Jones, her playmate during the past summer, was executing with neatness and gravity, a series of remarkable jack-knives, from the spring-board. The pool was deserted, save for a few hilarious children wading cautiously in the shallow end, attended by watchful, uniformed nurses. Practically speaking, Jerry and Jane had the premises to themselves. Voices came from the adjacent bath-houses, where people were dressing for lunch-

eon and the Inn was near enough for the bathers to hear the sounds of motor cars on the drive. The Flapper rose to her feet and went over to the spring-board, her slim, boyish figure unconsciously and unfamiliarly drooping. She waited until Jerry had emerged from the water after his tenth performance, and watched him swim toward her, shaking the wet from hair and eyes. He had absurdly long lashes and the drops clung to them like bright tears. He swung himself up to the ledge and presently stood, dripping, beside her.

"Why the gloom?" he inquired solicitously, very sturdy and broad-shouldered in his scant bathing garment, very brown and muscular and pleasing to look upon.

It was Saturday, and after the swim they had planned to dress and sally forth on a picnic party in the French blue roadster.

"Haven't any," denied the Flapper, with down-curved lips and bent tragic brows.

Jerry caught her gently around the waist and skilfully fox-trotted with her to the accompaniment of his own, shrill, not particularly tuneful whistle. The ledge was slippery with water and, as was to be expected, they suddenly fell in, together, and came to the surface, gasping and choking with water and mirth.

"Idiot!" said the Flapper, affectionately, "let's go and sit down—I've something to tell you."

"Me too," said Jerry, "something absodamlutely great!"

"Honest?"

"Cross my heart."

He did so, solemnly, went under again, and upon recovering, pulled her and himself back to the ledge once more. They sat there swinging their feet in friendly unison.

"Me first!" demanded the Flapper. "And it's perfectly rotten! Mother has had a silly wire or something and we're leaving on Monday!"

Jerry looked as if he had been suddenly informed that his entire family and all his friends had been wiped out of existence by an earthquake, a hurricane and a tidal wave.

"Oh! Damn!" said Jerry, with deep feeling. It had never really occurred to him that some day this particular phase of summer would be over.

"Well, it had to come sometime," remarked the more practical partner, "but it did seem awfully soon. Jerry—you'll forget me—?"

"Not on your life," he denied firmly, adding, with a touch of splendid sternness, "but you—you'll be going South and all that sort of thing, and then back to New York again, for vacations, and seeing all those fellows you're forever talking about and showing me pictures of—I wonder you can stand 'em," he remarked in apparent impersonal amazement, "lot of perfumed ball-room hounds with loaded hip pockets and heavy lines!"

Far from being goaded to wrath by this unjust and wholesale indictment of her friends, the Flapper smiled a small, wise smile.

"We'll go on to Hot Springs," she informed him, ignoring his speech, "school doesn't open until October. It's great fun there—the Springs, I mean. Gorgeous mountains, golf, horses, and a marvellous orchestra. Movies too! And everyone will be there!"

"Except me," commented Jerry, wounded and bitter.

The Flapper blinked rapidly. Her eyes looked as green as her bathing suit to-day, and there was a dew on them and on her short, black, Japanese-doll lashes.

"Except you," she repeated with the merest catch in her low voice, and then, with a return to the unconquerable optimism of eighteen, "but we will be coming back to town,—and school's only thirty miles out—and there are vacations—Stonystream isn't far, Jerry, you'll be coming up."

Jerry's great news, which had been, for the moment, submerged in the sorrow of an approaching loss, returned to him.

"But I shan't be here!" he told her, with superb effect.

The Flapper was round-eyed, breathless. Visions of suicide danced insanely across her cinema-fed imagination.

"N-not here?" she stuttered.

Jerry drew a long breath and clasped his brown hands between knees as bare and brown, preparatory to making a long speech.

"It's this way," he explained, "you know I was

in the army once—just for a couple of minutes, right after I was eighteen? And didn't get across. Well, I'd always wanted to go to college and after I got back home I was keener than ever. 'Nothing doing,' said the Old Man, 'the Joneses have managed pretty well for a number of generations without any higher education along the lines of football and drinking.' Sat on it flat. 'The hardware business for you,' says he. That was that. I had passed the entrance exams, you know, between leaving high school and Camp Devens—but—blooey—plans shot to pieces and Jerry out of luck.

"First thing I knew, I was back of that rotten old counter learning the business from the 'ground up,' handing out tacks and listening to my Old Boy reading regular hell-fire lectures on 'idle college men.' But this Summer—well, it was partly you, and partly your mother—you remember the time she came to see my mother and we beat it for the woods in the car? And partly Robin Hood, who is awfully thick with dad these days and has long confabs with him. . . . So that's that. I'm pretty old, of course," mourned Jerry sadly. "Twenty one. But they tell me that isn't exactly senile and that the other fellows won't object to a grey beard in classes. Anyway, the Old Man has seen the error of his ways and the hardware business will have to hang on for about forty-eight months without me. Dartmouth, for mine, the end of this month."

"Jerry!" The Flapper had been beating on his

arm for some time, vainly endeavoring to stem this tide of information long enough to ask questions, "Jerry! You knew—and you never told me!"

"I wanted to be sure," he apologized, "and when I sneaked off that time—remember, I told you it was on business for father . . . ? Well, it was all fixed up then. Jack Watts is going up, too, he was a couple of classes behind me in High. Nice kid. It won't be so bad—I'll try for the team," mused young Mr. Jones,—“and there'll be the winter sports. . . .”

Manlike, he had forgotten her in visions of new worlds to conquer. No one place is wide enough to hold the aspirations of youth. The Flapper was conscious of a pang, definite and deep rooted. Jerry, struggling back of a despised counter through a dull and lonely winter in little Stonystream, was likely to remember her and remember her *hard!* But college, with its new viewpoints, its “spirit,” its everything, which included new friends and girls-up-for-games—? The Flapper sighed, but a loyal little heart beat in its accustomed place beneath the jade-green jersey.

“It's wonderful,” she told him, “perfect! I'm tickled to death. Of course I'm going to take some credit. Haven't I held your mother's knitting for hours on end and goggled at her about ‘college men’? And haven't I vamped your father until I was perfectly frazzled and talked about ‘college advantages,’ sorter bringing it in casual-like? I accept your gratitude and make a bow, a nice low

one. And you will surely be coming to New York—and maybe to Briardell?”

“Surest thing you know,” he assured her, “and I’ll have you up to games and proms and everything and we’ll write—”

“It’s long after one,” interrupted Mrs. Van Wyck, suddenly appearing beside them. “Do you children ever expect to get off on your picnic?”

They came to their feet hurriedly, and the Flapper, mercifully dried off now, seized her slender mother around her crepe-de-chine waist.

“Mother!” she cried, “Jerry’s going to Dartmouth!” Suspicion laid hold of her as she looked into her mother’s eyes. “Did you know?” she asked.

Her weary parent smiled,

“Before he did,” she answered, “now run along and dress.”

“Oh! Clam!” accused her child with deep disrespect, and disappeared between rows of bath houses, challenging over her brown shoulder, “ten cents says I beat you dressing, Jerry!”

“Done!” he shouted after her and turned in the direction of his own rabbit hutch, but paused, looking rather shyly toward Mrs. Van Wyck, who stood there, still and languid, a blue parasol in her hand, her tall figure poised quietly, her absent eyes on the sunny water lapping the marble ledge.

Jerry, much abashed, came closer and lifted steady, boyish eyes to hers.

“Oh, Mrs. Van Wyck—I want—I’m so grateful—it was you that turned the trick for me, I know.

It was—fine of you!” he acknowledged, stumbling, his tongue a little heavy, but his heart singing.

Naida Van Wyck returned the honest, shining look.

“But,” she said, “it was so entirely right that you should go. Your father—just didn’t see it that way at first. But I talked to your mother and then to him and they both came round beautifully. I am glad that you should have your wish, Jerry.”

Jerry hesitated for the merest fraction of a second and then spoke out bravely,

“I’d almost gotten over wanting to go at all,” he confessed, “and then Jane came along. That brought it all back, somehow.”

“I see.” Mrs. Van Wyck’s lazy voice was very kind, and then she said confidentially, “I’m very glad that I brought Jane here. In a way, she has helped you, Jerry, and, in a way, you have helped me.”

“Me?” Jerry, ungrammatical, uncomprehending, stared at her in honest bewilderment.

“You . . . I want,” said Mrs. Van Wyck as she turned away, the parasol trailing its ebon tip on the wet marble, “to keep Jane as she is, a little longer. And you, Jerry,” she added on a note of laughter, “are the very best antidote for hot house poisoning that I know of—”

After a minute, alone by the gleaming water, Jerry partially understood.

But the Flapper won her ten cents.

They had their picnic, a little late, by Waterlily

Lake. The Inn had done very well. There were sandwiches of every shape, size, shade, filling and varying degrees of toothsomeness; coffee, in a thermos, very sweet and creamy; deviled eggs, a luscious melon, jars of jam, and cakes, each in their own little kimona of oiled paper. The trimmings were included also, glasses and a bottle of water; it was a super-picnic, a picnic for the gods. Presently, replete, they lay back in the shade and Jerry smoked a blissful cigarette and forcefully forbade the Flapper to indulge in a like dissipation. Then they talked; of everything and of nothing; scattered conversation, leaping with the fabled agility of the chamois from subject to subject, and, since parting drew near, heavily interlarded with "do you remember—?"

Jerry smoked his third cigarette and threw the remains from him, rose to stamp out the resultant fire and sank, weary with much exertion, back to the ground again.

"Jane?"

"Uh-huh?"

"Want me to tell you—about Elaine Adams?"

The Flapper partially closed her eyes, the lids drooping over the sudden greener gleam in the green, pellucid depths.

"If you want to—"

Jerry looked at his feet and spoke, fast and furiously.

"She's just my age—"

"Too old," interrupted the Flapper, sleepily, "go ahead."

Jerry sat up straight with a jerk that nearly dislocated his backbone;

"Well, school and all that. High, especially. I saw her a lot. She's so *darned* beautiful," said Jerry with a little wistfulness, "and well—I *did* like her, Jane, I—I thought it was for always. You know. And she turned me down cold. No, not exactly," added Jerry honestly, "she just kept me dangling, sorter. Nice today, beastly tomorrow—'where-have-I-met-you-before?' and 'why-haven't-you-come-sooner?' kind of thing. And I kept going back for more. Sickening, isn't it? Then you came . . ."

"Blamed good thing, too," said the Flapper, briskly. "She was horrid to you, Jerry. Too bad you didn't fall for Laurel. *She's* there! And now your beautiful Elaine is being horrid to that nice Hood person. More so—look at her and Etienne . . ."

"Hood's a corker," said his late rival, cordially. "She'd be an idiot to let him slip."

The Flapper said nothing. She knew what she knew. But presently she was aroused from lethargy and revery by a hand on her arm.

"Jane," said Jerry, sliding his hand down until it found her own warm, slightly sticky, little digits, "Jane? You know why I want to go to Dartmouth?"

"Football," she prevaricated, ignoring her hand. It was her left and the right knew nothing about it.

"Well—maybe," answered Jerry, "and maybe it will put me more in your class. . . . You're always raving about 'college men.' And then there's this 'gentleman' business. . . ."

"What 'gentleman business'?" inquired the Flapper, cautiously.

"Well, I suppose I'm *not*," said Jerry, out of a very sensitive spot somewhere in his interior, "not according to your standards. Your standards mean . . ."

He stopped abruptly, for the Flapper, with her finger on her sober lips, was gazing, stricken, beyond him, and to the right.

"What the—?" Jerry, turning his head, looked, too, and his mouth remained open on the unuttered word.

A man and a girl were passing between the lines of trees, clearly visible to the picnickers, but so occupied with one another that they did not see the involuntary spectators. The girl's yellow head was bent and the man, very tall and dark—was directing a rapid volley of—it would seem—questions—at that sunshiny crown. Just before the two passed from vision, she raised her head and both Jerry and Jane saw the unmistakable marks of tears, even at that distance. "Look at Elaine and Etienne," Jane had said a few minutes earlier; and now, by some curious twist of chance, they were

looking at them, in the very human flesh and with the mortal eye.

“. . . deuce!” said Jerry, neatly, finishing his sentence, as de Gabriac and his companion vanished from view.

Jane was breathless.

“Did you *ever*? Did you see—?”

“I didn’t see anything!” lied Jerry, firmly, “and neither did you, Jane Flapper Van Wyck. Remember that, if you value your young life.”

The Flapper laughed softly, once, and gave a little, convulsive squeeze to the hand which still held hers.

“And did you say,” she inquired, guilelessly, “that you weren’t a gentleman, Lord Chesterfield Jerry Jones?”

Jerry blushed, rather painfully, returned the pressure and argued;

“Well, it isn’t our business, is it? Read me some of that poetry chap you brought out with you. I hate poetry, rotten stuff, but never mind, I’m too sleepy and full of food to kick. And we’ll have to get back by six and have an early dinner. There’s a Fairbanks film at the Royal and we’d better take it in.”

The Flapper gave him one little side glance, very demure and rather mysterious, and with some exaggerated show of obedience, opened the slim, dark volume which lay beside her. So, while Jerry half slumbered and the golden irredeemable hours slipped silently past them, and a vagrant breeze ruf-

fled the placid blue of the lake, her light, pretty voice made melody of Rupert Brooke.

Now and then Jerry aroused himself to comment. He would not confess it, but there were lines in *The Soldier* which sent the goose flesh pricking and made tingly feelings in his scalp. And *The Hill*, although he understood it but incompletely, filled him with a certain beautiful sorrow, an ache of longing for he knew not what. . . .

They left their haven about five. The baskets, empty by now after a second raid on them for "tea," were packed in the car and Brooke with them. On the step, the Flapper faced about and cast one long quiet look around the trees and the lake and the sloping hillside which rose from the opposite shore.

"Oh," she cried, "Jerry, isn't it *precious*! And if I come back—next summer, maybe—it won't be the same."

"Why not?"

"I'll be grown up, I suppose," said the Flapper, with wisdom, "and nothing is the same, ever, anyway. . . ."

"Perhaps," comforted Jerry, from a different, but no less deep, wisdom, "it will be—better."

Their eyes were on a level as she stood, above him, on the step, and he put his young hands on her shoulders. The red, engaging mouth was so very close, the green eyes so clear and sweet for all that they looked on a modern world. Jerry drew a deep, painful breath,

"*'I want to keep her as she is a little longer . . .'*"

The half comprehended phrase came back to him, a signal of warning, a symbol of trust, dropped like a stone into his consciousness. His hands fell from her, he kissed her, lightly, boyishly, just on the curve of her round, flushed cheek.

"No matter what's different," Jerry said, "I'm the same! Don't forget that. And—don't *you* change, Jane—please."

"No." She gave him both her hands, then, quaintly serious, and with a quick, unaccustomed ache at her heart.

"I—I couldn't stand it—" said Jerry, huskily.

The Flapper's eyes filled, brimmed over. She drew both brown paws away and dug at them fiercely with childish, doubled fists.

"Oh . . . " said she, scurrying into the driver's seat with a whirl of skirts and a flash of silken ankles, "Oh . . ."

She settled herself, stepped on the gas, caught at the first foolish straw;

"But the one before the last, my dear, hurt quite as much as you!"

She flung the quotation at him, impishly, lilting it to a tune of her own creation, and added, dropping from song to speech,

"And that's how you all feel—Men!" scorned the Flapper, viciously.

But Jerry, climbing in beside her, smiled and said no word. He had seen for one lovely little moment those wet and elfin eyes, and Jerry was content.

CHAPTER X

ELAINE DEFEATED

*The great gods come. We, fearful, mark
Their sombre eyes and stern demands,
The guarded cup between their hands,
Their ecstasies, divine and dark. . . .
The great gods come . . . but what of those,
The half-gods, who have gone their ways?
Did we not owe them thoughtless days,
And light loves, sweet as transient rose?*

"Where's Elaine?" asked Mr. Adams, at supper.

"She had a headache," his wife answered, slicing the brown bread and spreading it with the creamy cottage cheese Mr. Adams loved, and in the manner he required brown bread to be spread. Her task finished, she handed him the thin slices on the old Wedgewood plate, dedicated to just such an appropriate rite.

"Thanks." He took the plate from her and removing a slice looked at it thoughtfully, without eating;

"I never heard that Elaine suffered from headaches," he said with the mixture of dormant fear and impatience with which most hale men regard the trifling feminine ailments of their women folks.

He ate his slice, reached for another and glanced

at his wife with eyes that had suddenly become shrewdly inquiring.

"The sun, perhaps," explained Mrs. Adams, carefully. But her own eyes fell.

Laurel looked up from her plate. She had been unusually silent all through the meal. Mechanically Mr. Adams noted that she looked pale, and rather plaintively pretty. That was another oddity. Laurel was not the plaintive type.

"Elaine went walking, Uncle George," she supplemented her aunt, "I think she overdid and was tired. Her head ached a little before she started out."

"So that's it. Robin shouldn't let her overdo," complained Elaine's father, with heaven only knows how much guile, "he ought to know better."

"But—it wasn't . . ."

Laurel caught her aunt's warning eye and broke off suddenly. A very perceptible silence fell in the cheerful, ugly little room with its bow window, blue curtains, china, and rag rugs and the "fernery" of potted plants in a painted green iron stand.

"Wasn't what, Laurel?" asked the thorough male.

But Laurel, with a murmured excuse, rose hastily and disappeared into the kitchen. Mrs. Adams, in the relieved manner of a wife and mother who has just averted a domestic crisis, or, at the least, an unpleasant half hour of argument, passed her plate for more cold beef, and Mr. Adams, assuming the mask of the carver, complied.

Mrs. Adams was far from relieved, however. She was too nervous a woman not to feel thunderstorms in the air before they actually arrived; too helpless temperamentally to be able to do more than evade the issue for a brief respite. Moreover she feared her husband because she was the type of woman who instinctively trembles in delicious insecurity before anything masculine; and she feared Elaine even more; partially because of her beauty—and partially because she knew that she had no control over her child whatever.

Laurel, communing with herself in the alcove-pantry, ostensibly seeking a delicate blend of chow-chow which the glazed eye of the new “help”—the third this season—had failed to discover, was wholesomely angry. Why should Aunt Frances—? Did she side with Etienne? Or, only follow the pleasant path of the least maternal resistance as so many mothers before her? Yet, after all, thought Laurel, with customary honesty, why should not Elaine walk with Etienne if Robin was otherwise occupied at Mr. Wynne’s? Just being engaged didn’t necessarily preclude. . . . Did it? Well—in this case it did. She shouldn’t go walking! And it was not fair! Thus Laurel, to herself, the pale cheeks touched with the questionable rose of irritation; emerging finally, completely flushed, from the swinging door, the required condiment clasped firmly in her hand.

“Oh,” remarked Mrs. Adams, with her usual lack of necessity, “did you find it?”

“Yes, Aunt Frances.”

Laurel sat down again, painfully conscious that her entire being had yearned to shout “of course I did! How can you be such an idiot?”

This odd sensation made her remorseful. She plied her aunt with attentions for the rest of the meal and was aware that the twinkle in Uncle George’s eyes meant something—probably that he had read her mind. At all events the twinkle soothed and embarrassed at one and the same time, but did not reprove.

Upstairs, the cause of the various and divers perturbations. Upstairs, Elaine. And flat on her narrow bed she lay, with her shining hair tossed on the white pillow and her arms wide spread in the immemorial attitude of a dozen emotions; grief, shame, communion.

Elaine thought that it was not fair, also. She wished that she had not gone walking to Waterlily Lake with Etienne de Gabriac. What a distance they had travelled! Was it the road from which there was no return? How did one get back again, back to the highroad of commonplace, back to the wide path of safety?

She wished that she had never laid eyes on that dark, quiet, high-bred face. Wished it with a sob and caught her breath at such blasphemy. What had he not made her feel—what shame, what curious, unreasoning terror; and other emotions too intricately entangled for dissection, some sweet

and painful with their sweetness and others horrible, belittling . . . ?

He had had no right to speak to her in that alienated, hard voice; she was not naturally imaginative, but she remembered thinking in a sudden flash that his words pattered down on her defenceless, uncovered head like hail. Only—hail melts. . . .

He had no right. He had every right. . . . she re-lived again snatches of the long conversation, if anything so sustainedly onesided could be thus termed.

“You do not love Robin,” Etienne had said. “You marry him because he is the first eligible man you have met. You like his looks, his breeding, his adoration; you care very much for his money, for what it will buy you. And you care for his love, his great love, exactly—nothing.” He had snapped his fingers there she recalled, with a small, sharp spurt of sound. “Ah, then, I beg your pardon, for his love you do, somewhat, care. As a little white cat cares for the caressing touch of the hand which flatters and soothes her. ‘See how pretty I am,’ she purrs, under that hypnotic touch, ‘how sleek, how fine, how soft! I know you admire me, I know you delight in the feel of my so-soft coat under your hand. And I love you, *because* you admire me, and take delight in my softness.’ No, no, do not speak now and flash your eyes at me and turn aside! This is but truth, and you know it in your heart. Robin loves you. You are affianced to Robin; it is logical to conclude

that you love Robin. Not as logical as usual, perhaps! No matter. All this summer you have divided your favors between us, Robin, your lover confessed, and me, a stranger. You have given me all your little petulances and graces, taken your charms out walking with you to perform for me, like so many trained kittens! And you have given me your eyes and your hands, your half word, your eloquent silence. The little white cat is not content with the caresses of one. Is this not so, Elaine? You hurt your lover cruelly, you hurt me, who have not the right to call myself your lover—and you go unscathed! ‘You pick your way over—if I may be melodramatic—living hearts, which are not as unfeeling as cobblestones, and you wear pointed heels. You pick your way—and smile!’ ” Here the steady, rapid voice broke and deepened. “By Heaven, I am sorry for you, Elaine!”

Ah, but she had been furious, turning on him with shattered, angry words, leaving him to walk away, stumbling a little for the mist in her eyes. But he was again inevitably beside her, his voice under control, his low words beating like deft, stinging wings into her brain.

“You are angry with me? But not with good anger, not with righteous indignation! You are angry because I tell you the truth. No one has ever told you the truth before. Not even Laurel. And underneath, Elaine, you are *not* really angry. You are smiling because you know I love you; you are content because I commit the base

treachery of telling you so. But, loving you, how well I know you. Selfish, heartless, sweet; and incomparably beautiful. First Robin, then Etienne? Suppose Etienne had come to Stonystream before Robin found his destined way there. What then? Had he more to offer—a wider, fuller life? A little more of the money you so well love because it has the power to buy pretty things, which engender more admiration? A name, not so obscure? A trumpery, ancient title? But Robin's name will one day stare at you from the papers and from great glaring billboards. You know that, it is not displeasing to you; yet you care so little for the fine, painstaking tools with which Robin must carve out that name for you. And perhaps you know this too; that with Robin you will always come before his work; *not with me, Elaine!* Whom do you love, Elaine? Who most nearly touches you, holds you, after yourself? Who stands next to Elaine in your little heart? Is it Robin? Is it I? Or have you no capacity for caring in you, as I have, of late, suspected. Do the eyes, then, mean nothing—and the touch of the lovely, pale hand, even less . . . ? Ah . . .” said Etienne, in a sudden flash of sorrowful triumph, “*touche!* I can—at least,—make you cry!”

The great, crystal tears ran down her cheeks, not much disfiguring them. But more followed. They were salt with humiliation, left traces, traces that, a few minutes later, Jerry and Jane, to their amazement, saw.

"Oh, I hate you—I hate you!" said Elaine, more human than any one had ever seen her, less the lily maid, more the woman.

Etienne smiled;

"That is something. Better than indifference; warmer than tolerance. At least, and at last, a genuine emotion!"

"If Robin were here,—" she threatened him, furiously.

"But he is not. You took care that he should not be. You arranged for us this little, amiable stroll. What did you expect, Elaine? Sighs, discreet allusions to a broken heart, a song in the minor key of '*It might have been, es wäre zu schön gewesen . . . ?*' You could have handled that, my dear—with answering sighs, with allusions even more discreet. Always the veil, always the pretty mask. And then, before we parted at Adams House, a little curtain lecture tuned to 'Too late! We must be brave!' Oh, women!" laughed Etienne, with desolate, dark eyes in which no mirth shone. "Oh, women! All the little hackneyed, honied bag of tricks before which men are helpless. . . ."

She did not answer. Etienne, stooping abruptly, laid his hand very lightly on her shoulder, swung her around and, with a hand beneath her round chin, forced her to raise that sunny-beaten head. The thought went through his mind that she was like a flower after rain. . . . He held her there but could not hold the blue, wet eyes with his.

"Can you not be honest with me?" he asked her, very sadly, "just once? If it is Robin for whom you care, if you have been playing with me, all this summer, tell me so. I will ask your pardon for my brutality, I will kiss those cruel, empty little hands and go away . . . and you may make your peace with your own heart, and with Robin's heart as best you may. But if it is I for whom you care—then I shall go to Robin, who had deserved better at my hands, and yours—and you shall go with me and we shall tell him the truth as honorable people must. Then, when this concert tour of mine is ended, I shall take you back to Paris with me and I shall teach you two things; loyalty and love. They are inseparable, you cannot learn one without the other. Answer me, Elaine; Etienne or Robin—Robin, who would die before he hurt you—and Etienne, who must hurt you in order not to die?"

"How dare you . . . ?" She stopped. He had caught her eyes at last and would not let them go. She looked deep into them and something struggled to birth in her narrow soul, lacerating, wounding, agonizing. She could not look away from those dark houses of love and tragedy, of bitterness and truth. With an effort that was both spiritual and physical, she bent her bright head again;

"I don't know—" she whispered. And lied.

Etienne dropped his hands.

He was sick to his soul. Not even honest here! And he had been more than brutal. That hurt

him, it would always hurt him that he had had to be a polished savage, wrenching, shaking the truth from her. . . .

"Three days," he said, "I give you three days. I leave in six. In three I will come to you, and ask you again. For the last time."

They had walked on then, very silent; until they had almost reached Stonystream, neither had spoken. Then it had been that, with, it seemed, violence, Etienne had broken the hush which lay between and around them.

"Listen. If it is Robin, after all, you know I shall go away and wish for your happiness. For his, too, the wishing cannot make it so. I shall think of you growing dull, content, indifferent, with an initial or two to embroider on your towels, with a blunted interest in the little cares and pleasures of your life. But that will be when you may no longer seek and find outside stimulus. One day that adventuring into strange hearts will be over and the torch in your eyes will die, never to light the forbidden fires again. I warn you of this also; if you marry me, my dear, that torch will burn for me and for none other. I am not willing to be careless with my wife. . . ."

She remembered, lying there, every word. Each was a little knife in her soft breast. Most keenly of all she felt the knife that turned and turned again and drew blood with each turning; the knife of his even tone that had said, "with Robin, you will always come before his work; *not with me.*"

There would always be that rival; Etienne's music. She would have to battle all her life against that inexorable mistress, to whom his days and his genius, the genius that was part of him, his power and his charm, were dedicated. With her white flesh she would have to fight, with her yellow hair and her deep, amazing eyes. For music would be Etienne's altar and sanctuary; if she should hurt him, if she failed him, he would go back to those other, eternally youthful arms for comfort, for release, for passion. . . .

Go back to them? He had never left them, not even for her!

Her thoughts were not formed in so many words. Never articulate, she was less so than ever at this moment. But she understood.

Elaine turned restlessly on the bed. Robin? But Robin was a dim, fading figure, far off; yet a figure which stood for harbour, for safety, for protection. Etienne was Adventure, the Open Sea, the Shock of Dismay, the Unknown Lover, unpossessed in possession; never certain, never sure. . . .

Which?

Poor little psyche, lifting the flickering lamp of her awakened heart in hands too frail to shield the flame, by which to see clear.

She would never know him; she might not hold him. She was, in a measure, in terror of him, of the quiet voice and the seeing eyes, the sensitive fingers that had stirred her cool blood to emotions devastating to a girl of her psychology. And

he was the Stranger and would so remain; the Conqueror, beating down the storied, armoured defenses of her ego. Therefore, as far as in her lay, she loved him.

She heard Laurel, hesitating outside the closed and locked door; guessed a tray in those loyal hands from the clinking sound of silver and glass, caught her control, managed finally a steady voice;

"I don't want anything, thank you, dear. Please go away."

And heard the defeated steps turn, and recede; and beat once more at her pillows with doubled futile fist.

She was not courageous, this white Elaine. Everything in her shrank from facing Robin; from her family, their startled anger, their unmodern shame; the Adamses did not look lightly upon the broken word; and from, perhaps, most of all, the questions and prying, the side glances of her friends. . . .

Not brave; not honest; unless Robin could make her so—

The last word Etienne had spoken came to her clearly;

"Three days, Elaine. And if I took you in my arms now and kissed you as I long to kiss you, you would not keep me waiting for my answer. But I do not wish that—coercion. You must decide—alone. When I kiss you, I shall kiss the lips of my promised wife, and not those of another man's affianced."

She closed her eyes, hiding their sudden, slow fire in the tumbled pillows. A little pulse beat dully in her throat.

"Three days . . . ?

CHAPTER XI

ROBIN BUILDS A FIRE

*Hurt love, stabbed pride and youth in grief,
So sure of sorrow, sworn to pain,
Comes time, the healer, time the thief,
And youth looks past old tears again.
But who shall say that youth has lost,
Or what his comforting has cost?*

"Jerry," confessed the Flapper on the steps of the parlor car that fateful Monday morning, the while her mother was occupied with instructions to the porter, "Jerry, before I go—I thought of writing it but perhaps I'd better get it off my chest now—I wasn't engaged to two Princeton men! I wasn't even engaged to *one* of them! . . . I've never been engaged, even a little! Only, it's smart to talk that way, awfully Ritzy and all that—and all the girls do—just as if they had regiments of men tying solitaires on the door knob and wore a different one every day and changed twice on Sundays . . . so, I fibbed to you, Jerry."

He had only just time enough in which to say he was glad and to conceal from her the fact that he had suspected the truth all along, when the conductor unfeelingly gave the signal. Mrs. Van

Wyck gave him both her hands, wished him luck and he helped her aboard and stood back on the platform with that sudden, sickening, sinking sense of loss which comes to the one who stays behind. But he could still keep the Flapper in sight for two minutes. Despite her mother, and the frantic gestures of the porter, she clung there, on the step, the red curls flying under the brown Tam, a damp, wadded handkerchief limply hanging from her hand, the wind of the train's increasing speed snatching the parting words of admonition from her lips. "Good-bye! Don't forget to write!"

Jerry, walking back to the hardware shop, was deep in a quicksand of gloom. But—Dartmouth was a matter of but a few days ahead of him—presently Jane would be back from Hot Springs and at school near New York—vacations were not so very far away—and Jerry was twenty-one.

On Main Street he saw Etienne de Gabriac, but the Frenchman was walking rather aimlessly, or so it seemed to Jerry, on the opposite side of the street and did not appear to see the younger man's lifted hand, nor to hear his hail. Jerry speculated for a moment on this obvious abstraction, his mind flashing back to the scene by Waterlily Lake; but the memory, bringing Jane into his thoughts again, centred them around her once more and he swiftly forgot the two unconscious intruders into his special Arcady.

Monday having passed, Tuesday inevitably ar-

rived. Elaine had kept much to her room since Saturday, pleading an indisposition. Mrs. Adams was plaintive because her camomile tea was consistently refused, and Laurel found herself entertaining, at all times, a worried and questioning Robin. She dutifully conveyed his notes, flowers and messages to her cousin and brazenly invented verbal return messages as Elaine's usual formula on these occasions was, "I can't see him. Do go away."

Mr. Adams, much alarmed, threatened to send for the doctor, but Elaine, with a firmness foreign to her, refused the attention. She was quite all right . . . just a headache and an aversion to food . . . she wanted to stay quiet until the attack passed . . . please, would they be so good as to leave her alone?

Tuesday evening, startlingly pale, with heavy eyes veiled above the dark shadows which were as bruises on a flower petal against the satin of her skin, Elaine came down to supper. Robin had been over earlier, she had sent him word that she would see him at nine. At eight she expected de Gabriac. He had sent her that much word . . . and her instructions. She ate nothing, she said nothing. And at eight Etienne arrived at Adams House.

Mr. Adams, in the living room, raised an eyebrow at his wife over the evening paper. Nobody answered the challenge and Laurel at the piano, running nervous chords, had had her instructions

also. The doors were closed and Elaine was alone with Etienne in the little glassed-in alcove made by the dining room bow windows.

Chrysanthemums were blooming there in earthen pots. As long as she lived Elaine would never forget their sharp, pungent odor.

Laurel met Etienne on his arrival, took him to the dining room door and there left him. In the window seat Elaine caught at her breath and then rose to meet him, swaying perceptibly and deathly white.

He came to her, said no word, only his intent eyes questioned her. His hands were clasped behind him, and he did not touch her.

A sound, half sigh, half defeated, tired sob broke from her and of her own free will she moved nearer to him, nearer still and bent the tall, yellow head to his shoulder.

Etienne's arms went around her then, held her close. There was a deep, almost painful silence in the room and the minutes ticked gravely past unheeded. For the time being, Elaine put aside the things that had tormented her, treadmill worries, small, cowardly fears. She was, at last, where she belonged and no matter what dangers and disturbances were ahead of her she was momentarily at peace. Etienne, with his lips on the shining hair was exultant, extraordinarily grateful, and not a little pitiful. There was nothing joyous about Elaine's surrender. It was tired, reluctant, beaten. He had battered down her defences with bitter

words, with a superior will, with merciless insight. She came to him, captive, with the submission that he had compelled. Love had not "run to meet Love" on eager feet, with open arms and laughing lips; Love had come, haltingly, with head bowed, as to a yoke.

These things seemed strange to Etienne. And he wondered, a little drearily, what the motive back of the whole scheme of things was. He knew he paid a price for his love; and Elaine, a price for hers.

There were footsteps outside and a murmur. Elaine raised her head, and her lips shook miserably. She heard Robin's voice and Laurel's answer to his question came to her clearly.

"She's in the dining room, Robin. You can go in." And to Elaine, it seemed that the words carried with them a certain weight of warning and of pity. Yet Laurel knew nothing. She drew herself away from Etienne, her eyes seeking his in anxiety and shame, her cold hand still fast in his warm one. He tightened his hold, merely, and smiled at her with grave eyes.

Robin, entering, stopped short. There they stood, hand fast, very quiet, not moving or speaking. His quick glance shot from one to the other, and he felt sick with the rush of hot blood from his heart and back again. The very air felt tense and strange, like tightly drawn silk.

"What's up?" asked Robin, achieving a certain false lightness of tone.

Elaine, with a small, despairing gesture, turned toward Etienne and did not answer.

"It is this," said Etienne very gently. "We love each other, Elaine and I, and she must ask you to release her from her promise. What fault there has been in this is entirely mine, Robin."

For a second Robin did not quite grasp it. Then as the full import of the words came to him he took a step forward, furiously;

"You—!"

But Etienne's steady eyes encountered the inflamed, bewildered look and held it.

"Yes," he answered, "scoundrel, blackguard, what you will . . . I accept the terms, but, on my word of honor, Robin, which must seem a meaningless phrase to you, in my mouth—I wouldn't have spoken to her, had I not been convinced that she did not love you—and—*did* love me."

Robin's clenched hands fell to his side.

"Is this—true?" he asked, and turned to Elaine, hoping against hope, against the evidence of eyes and ears and heart, forcing unbelief in the face of proof.

For answer, she drew from her finger the diamond she had loved and laid it on the small table between them.

"Yes," she said, speaking for the first time, and speaking quite simply. "Yes." Inevitably, she added, "ah, Robin,—forgive me!"

Robin picked up the shining circle and slipped it

quite coolly into his pocket. He was quite unaware of what he did. The act was a gesture, no more.

"Then there is no need of further conversation," he told them. "I am glad that you found out before it was too late. It seems that I have been living in a fool's paradise, in which men were honorable and women were true!"

He bowed to them both, quite formally.

"Good evening!" he said.

They watched him take the few steps to the door, walking very erect. They heard him pass down the hall, heard him on the wooden porch and then there came to them the curious sound of running feet.

Elaine sat down, suddenly, put her arms on the table, laid her head upon them. She cried, noiselessly, and with relief. But Etienne stood by the plants in the bow window and looked out into the uncaring night. His face was very sombre.

"Oh—*life*—," thought Etienne, "and no man reaches happiness save through another's pain. . . ."

He knew that Elaine, weeping for Robin, would dry her eyes and would, presently, forget. She had his love, she would have new surroundings, her beauty would shine clear in the setting he would give it. In another year, it would be "Poor Robin!" with a little, half-complacent sigh; and he knew too, that Robin would forget, as the earth, spring-quickenened, forgets the winter just past, the winter

which seemed so cruelly long. But he would not forget. Of the three Etienne would remember the longest.

He put his hand on Elaine's shoulder, turning from the night and his thoughts to her, raised her and kissed her, without passion, but very tenderly, on the quivering mouth.

"Dry your lovely eyes, dearest," he told her, "we must go now to your father."

Two hours later it was all over. They had been stormed at, wept over, condemned, forgiven. At a little past eleven, Etienne left Adams House. He had kissed Elaine again, known her slow, soft response, had held her hotly to him, told her, brokenly, in the Little Language of Lovers, the things which had long been in his heart to tell her. Now, with the cool night wind against his face he walked back to the Inn. After the first incoherent tumult in Adams House he had swiftly decided for them all. His sister must join him, after the tour, must take an apartment in New York. They would be married from there in the spring; and would sail, directly, for France. That much was settled; tomorrow he would cable; in three days he was forced to leave Stonystream to begin his concert engagement.

At Adams House three people sat in the living room, where he had left them, each grappling with his or her own compelling emotions. Mrs. Adams, faintly grasping that Elaine was to be definitely separated from her, was still crying, in little noisy

gasps. With the shock and sorrow, the sudden wrench of change, there mingled presently a vague but growing pride that she would soon acknowledge a titled and well known son-in-law. Through these tangled wires of feeling ran dismay, an electric force, at what the town would say; and a great wonder at this strange new Elaine, whom, in other guise, she had known for one and twenty years.

Mr. Adams, apart from his rooted distaste for the spectacular, the unusual, the melodramatic—and surely this evening had bordered on, at least, drama?—found himself curiously relieved. He knew something of his daughter, he guessed her safe, he imagined her happy. And Etienne was fine—fine—although, unfortunately, “foreign.” Manlike, he thought of Robin with sensitiveness and shrinking. Damned hard on Robin and difficult all around. He rose, with an effort, suddenly grown rather old. He had thought, at the end of his mental rope, of Elaine in Paris. . . .

“Come to bed, Frances,” he said, with gruff tenderness, “you’ve had—we have all had—a trying evening.”

She rose obediently, her nose red, her eyes swollen, and dabbed at her faded cheeks with a wet, inadequate piece of linen.

“Coming, Laurel?”

Laurel, in a corner, very quiet, aroused herself to answer;

“Presently, auntie.”

Mrs. Adams, on the threshold, sighed, tremulously;

"Very well, put out the lights, dear. Elaine won't be down again."

"No," thought Laurel, "she'll be sitting up, wanting to talk. And I can't."

Alone, she rose and started to walk about. She was not willing yet to hear confidences. And did not know that her cousin was by no means ready to share them with her. Elaine had no inclination toward speech, hardly toward thought. She lay in the dark, still, almost without breath. In a strange, suffusing glow she lay, and for the first time in her life and to the exclusion of all else, she *felt*, with senses suddenly sharpened, with eyes closed against the intrusion of physical sight, with ears sealed to all sound save the beating of her heart.

Laurel, wandering out on the porch, looked over across the way. All the lights were burning in that other house. She remembered with amazement, that Mrs. Hood was not there, that she had gone to town on the previous day and would not be back for some time. So Robin was alone? The thought struck unreasoning terror into her mind. Alone?

On the impulse, with that devastating fear, unexpressed but growing, behind it, Laurel ran, lightly, swiftly, without a wrap, across the intervening lawn. She came to Robin's house and tried the door; it opened at her touch and she

passed within, mounting the stairs, hurrying to reach him. A sharp, unpleasant odor as of burning paper, met her half-way up. She quickened her pace and presently stood outside the door of Robin's room. It was open; she saw him and her heart hurt her. She spoke, but he did not hear her, so she went in.

Robin was kneeling by the open fireplace. He had set some logs to roaring and was feeding the flames with sheet after sheet of white paper. His face was grim and absorbed, his hair raked through with an impatient hand, a streak of ash was black and absurd across his forehead.

He did not turn as Laurel came in and stood, just inside the door. But he sensed the presence of another person:

"Clear out," he ordered, curtly, speaking, as he supposed, to one of the ubiquitous Japs, "I told you to get to bed."

"Robin . . . ?"

His name fell softly, lightly, on the smoky air. He turned and came, somehow, to his feet.

"Laurel!"

He hated her for being there, for following him, for—everything. She was not the Rose, but she had dwelt with her. Laurel was quick to see the distrust in his eyes.

"I came—"

"With a message? I don't want it, thanks," interrupted Robin, harshly.

"No, no message, Robin."

She went to him, touched him on the arm, felt his flesh crawl away from her, and pointed steadily, with her free hand, to the fire;

"What are you burning?"

There was something serene about her, something cool and quiet. Robin felt the heat of his anger die from him, and with it some of his insanity. Suddenly he felt very young, very tired and very foolish. He pushed back his thick, tumbled hair and looked at her through saner, bloodshot eyes.

"My play," he answered, with no intonation whatever.

"Oh, my *dear!*"

For a moment Laurel was appalled. She could have cried out with tears, had she not known that Robin had seen enough of weeping for one night. To burn the best beloved; to destroy, in this lonely hour, the thing that meant so much to him! As an anticlimax she remembered that of course there were carbons. And they were in her own possession. He had given them to her, after he had made her timidly suggested corrections, with the injunction; "just run over it again, by yourself, there's a good girl." Well, they were safe with her and she would keep them until the day he would want them again. Of course, he had not remembered and she would not remind him now. The very fact that he had forgotten made his destruction the more tragic to her. Poor boy! Poor boy! Thrusting the labor of an entire sum-

mer into the flames, relentlessly trying at the same time to wipe out the summer itself by that symbolic act of vandalism. A tremendous pity for him welled up in her, engulfing for the time, all her human, woman's love for him. She was as tender toward him as if he had been her little, mistaken child.

She took his now unresisting arm and forced him to a chair. Mechanically he sat down and Laurel knelt beside him, her small round face, eager and flushed, upturned to his almost unrecognizing gaze.

"Listen, Robin," she begged him, "I can't say anything that will help you, but try to remember this, no matter how much it hurts you. Elaine is happy—she's *happy*, Robin! She loves Etienne. If she had loved you, this would never have happened. And if she didn't love you, you wouldn't want her, Robin. You have so much left; your work, your friends, above all, your mother. Elaine never existed. Try to believe that. Make it part of yourself. She never existed. She was just a dream, it was all a dream. This is a different Elaine, Etienne's Elaine. She was never yours. And you wouldn't want anything that wasn't really *yours*, Robin."

"No." He was listening, not looking at her now, and he spoke dully, "No. I wouldn't. Just a dream—you're quite right, Laurel. Not mine; and never was."

Laurel had caught his little, repulsing gesture at

the mention of his work. Wisely she concluded to say no more about it, then. That would all come later, follow naturally as the wound started to heal. With yet more wisdom, she realized that work would mean all the more to him for this temporary eclipse, that he would go back to it with a bull dog tenacity, with a new delight, would drug himself with it into forgetfulness.

She waited.

"You're a good sort," said Robin, at length. "Listen. I can't stay here. I've got to get out. Will you tell mother when she comes home? This house is— Well, I'm going to John Wynne's," he said, "to-night. He'll take me in and ask no questions. I'll let mother know later what I'm going to do."

"Very well."

She got to her feet, feeling that unpleasant flatness of things in general, which succeeds strong self-forgetting emotion.

Robin rose also and looked helplessly around.

"I suppose I'd better put something in a bag," he said.

Laurel almost smiled. More anticlimax. Life was made up of them, it seemed, the familiar gesture of everyday creeping into the house of tragedy. Silently she helped him to pack, even rescued his razors from the bathroom and hunted up his slippers, aiding him so unobtrusively that he hardly realized she was there beside him. It

was very late when they left the house, and Laurel watched him as he walked away from her, down the road with the merest word of parting, flung briefly to her. Starting off on that long, dark mile to the landing place, the bag in his hands, his shoulders sagging under another, different weight.

Then she went home, let herself softly in and crept up the black, creaking stairway. Presently she lay in the bed beside Elaine's quiet bed, listening to her cousin's even breathing, and crying without sound in the kindly darkness.

John Wynne, still at his desk, heard a furious knocking at his door, and opened it, marvelling, to Robin.

"I've come," said the unbidden guest, "as you told me to. I've had a—crash. Will you take me in?"

Wynne, with his arm around the boy's shoulder, said, very quietly,

"Of course, 'old man.'"

He pulled him into the living room, poured him a drink. And after a time stole carefully into the other smaller room with a shield candle in his hand. There, he bent over Robin who, with his arms above his head and something like peace on his haggard young face, slept heavily in John Wynne's bed.

Wynne drew a blanket closer about him, opened the window another inch and returning to the liv-

ing room, threw himself down on the hard couch. And until morning, Laurel, sleepless in Adams House, and Wynne, staring at the red embers of the fire, in the shanty at Winding River, kept their separate vigils over the boy whom they both loved.

CHAPTER XII

JOHN WYNNE'S STORY

*The blown bubble of a dream,
The shattered crystal of delight,
The spilled and fragrant wine of hope,
Day after day; night after night.*

On the following morning Robin sent a note to Stonystream, by the morose Pedro, which was to await the not specified day of his mother's return. It was fairly long, but, to a woman, unsatisfactory.

"Dearest Mother :

"Laurel will explain to you why I am imposing for a time on Mr. Wynne's hospitality. If the apartment in town is ready for occupancy, will you have Dum and Dee pack for me and send the things up as soon as possible? Your lease expires there at the end of the month, anyway. I don't know how long I shall be away—I'm all fixed for clothes as you know I left some of my camping outfit with Mr. Wynne some time ago, against use later in the fall. If you care to wait in Stonystream for me, I will tell you what day I shall come in and will drive you up the same day. Otherwise, if you decide to go by train, leave one of the Japs in the house and I will get him and the car when I come in. And, please, mother,

let's not discuss what has happened when we finally meet."

"Devotedly,
"ROBIN."

Dum had been instructed to report to Laurel when Mrs. Hood telephoned her train from town, and Laurel met her at the train when she arrived. On the way home, in Robin's car, which Laurel had often driven during the summer, she briefly and clearly told her the news.

For a moment, Mrs. Hood said nothing; then she remarked,

"Poor Robin! But I can't pretend that I am sorry—except for his pain. Did he leave a message for me, Laurel?"

"He said he would write you," was the answer. "Perhaps he has, by now. I haven't asked."

Anne found the letter waiting for her. She had asked Laurel to come in the house with her, and tore the letter open, and read it, with the girl standing quietly by, her anxious eyes on the older woman's face.

When she had read and re-read it, Mrs. Hood folded the letter and put it in the pocket of her coat.

"I think," she said, evenly, with a little frown of concentration between her thick, dark brows, "I think I shall go to town as soon as I can get packed up. I am quite sure that Robin would prefer to meet me there. I shall leave one of the

servants here to wait for his return and look after things. As we have rented a furnished apartment in town, this furniture, such of it as is mine, would have had to go to storage anyway. If things had fallen out—differently—I would simply have renewed the lease here and left everything as it is in the house so that Robin could come down often during the winter, conveniently. As it is, well, if we are not out by the first, I am sure that my very amiable landlord will let me leave things as they are until I can dispose of them. And you will watch over them for me, will you not?"

Laurel nodded and Mrs. Hood touched her soft brown hair in a swift affectionate caress.

"You're the best child, Laurel! I wonder if, later, you would care to come up to town and stay with me—whenever your aunt can spare you? There will always be room for such a mite as you and always a welcome. . . ."

"Oh, but I'd love to!" said Laurel. "But—perhaps Robin would rather not be reminded?"

"I fancy he won't be with me long, in town," his mother said, "he is a restless boy; he was always restless. And now that this has happened I imagine he will pick up an old crony or two somewhere and go off for a trip—hunting, perhaps—or just wandering. And he will have his work. I have advised him to take a studio in town—the apartment will be too small for him to write without interruption—and I, personally, would be somewhat confused by the constant sound of typing. It would

be like living in an office. We have never taken so tiny a pied-à-terre before, you see."

Laurel hesitated a moment and then, abruptly, spoke out.

"That night," she said, with such an intonation that Mrs. Hood could not possibly mistake which night she meant—"that night, you know, he burned the play. . . ."

Mrs. Hood, taking off her hat before the hall mirror, and running the inquiring fingers through her heavy hair, let her hands fall, and sat down on the window seat without premeditation. She looked incredulously at Laurel;

"Not really!"

"Yes. But he forgot," added Laurel, a little reluctantly, "that he had given me the carbons. And I didn't tell him."

She paused, but, as no sound came from Mrs. Hood, went on;

"Please, will you take them? I will bring them over to-morrow. Something might happen to them with me and then, too, you will know exactly the right moment in which to give them to him."

Mrs. Hood aroused herself from that inner distressing vision of Robin burning his play. She looked for a long moment at Laurel.

"You saw him—burn the play?"

"Yes. After a long time—after he had left the house, I remembered you were away and I got a little worried. It was absurd but I did. So I ran across and went up—and he was in his room.

And we talked and I helped him pack and saw him start to Mr. Wynne's."

Mrs. Hood's dark eyes were very tender. She put a hand out and drew Laurel down beside her;

"You're a very faithful friend, Laurel. The dearest little watch dog. . . . I'm very grateful and some day my poor Robin shall be grateful, too. Yes, bring me the play and I will give it to him, a little later when I can risk the shock to his sense of drama." She smiled a little as she spoke, and Laurel wondered if, back of the smile, Mrs. Hood realized anything of what it would cost Robin's "faithful little friend" to surrender even that much of him to his mother. Laurel had cherished the carbon copies; they were living in a bureau drawer, smudging linen and lace, leaving their purple imprint on her most cherished under linen.

But if Mrs. Hood guessed, she made no further sign.

She kissed Laurel, thanked her again, and the girl, forcing a smile and a light word of dissent, left her. She didn't want Robin's gratitude, anyway. She hated the thought of it. She left the car for the mechanical and silent Dum to put in the garage and went home. Everything in her shrank from facing the people of Adams House. It seemed hideous that she should have to be there, to hear of Etienne on every side, to sew and plan, to hear snatches of his letters read aloud—and never a word of Robin, except in pity, when so short a time ago it had all been so different. When she arrived at the door

she found Etienne there; he had snatched an extra two days from his allotted time in town and had come now to say goodbye and to show the cables from his sister. Laurel, managing all the motions of congratulation, was conscious only of a heavy weariness at her heart. It was Etienne who read her truly, and who said to her as, for a moment they stood alone;

“Laurel, take care of Elaine for me. And do not blame me over much, my little cousin-to-be. We are all puppets when Love pulls the heart strings.”

He kissed her on the forehead and was gone, with Elaine, in the taxi which was to take him to the station. Laurel, waving to him from the porch, thought with a half-hearted flare of irony, that of all people in the world, Elaine seemed most competent of taking care of herself. Things arranged themselves for her. It seemed to be a perquisite of beauty.

Later, Elaine came home, with blurred vision, and a happy-sorrowful smile. She was quiet and rather remote and shut herself in her room for a time. But the separation was not to be for long. In a few weeks Etienne would be back again for a flying visit and they would all go to town to witness his New York concert triumph. And see him off on the beginning of the tour—and one could always count the time until Spring.

Before Mrs. Hood left Stonystream, she sent a message to Elaine's mother. In obedience to this

summons, Mrs. Adams went to tea next door, with her new fall hat somewhat perilously tilted over her brows, and her entire person in a self styled "flutter." And returned home, frankly red about the eyes. What passed between the two mothers, no one ever knew nor asked, but Mrs. Adams, in that mystic marital hour just at bedtime, said, haltingly, to her husband;

"She doesn't blame Elaine. Nor Etienne either, But I quite understand why she doesn't want to see either of them now. She's a wonderful woman, George—I wish—but of course none of us could foresee how things would turn out and we couldn't really help it!"

Mr. Adams made noises in his throat. He had had a bewildering evening. In the last serious talk he had managed with Etienne, his prospective son-in-law had waived the question of "dot," which the older man had vaguely fancied was a law in all foreign countries and therefore had had some difficulty in screwing up his courage in order to ask Etienne frankly if what he could spare, would be sufficient to "purchase a husband" for Elaine. Of course Mr. Adams hadn't meant to put it that way, but that was the gist of it. However, he hadn't had to do more than say, "about that dowry now—" when Etienne had stopped him and counter-proposed certain lavish marriage settlements which he insisted on making upon Elaine. At this, Mr. Adams was startled and somewhat overcome. Also he had had an irritating and tiring day in town and

his emotions were a mixture of sentiment and petulance. Picturing Mrs. Hood, whom he very greatly liked, sitting there in her lonely house, pouring tea for his wife and steadily saying generous things about the girl who had robbed her son of happiness, made his mood lean too far on the sentimental side to please him. So, as stated, he made noises in his throat, in answer to his wife. Translated by her, for she was an adept in such a case, they ran;

"Well, why should she? After all, the affair was nobody's actual fault and we, of all people, were powerless to prevent it."

"Still, it's only natural," his wife reasonably replied, "that she should feel hurt for Robin's sake. She's his mother. . . ."

"Who denied it?" asked Mr. Adams peevishly and climbed into bed. He was quite aware of increased admiration for Mrs. Hood. Took it like a thoroughbred, by Jove! And he was also aware that had he had a choice, all things being equal, he would have preferred Robin as a son; Robin who was American, reachable, understandable. But it was Elaine who had the privilege of choice and he knew in his heart that whatever Etienne was for him, for her, he was the right man. And a good sort—too. Mr. Adams had had a moment of very acute embarrassment when he thought he would have to explain his limited means to Elaine's lover—but the boy had spared him all that and had handled the half hour of conference with the utmost

tact and a delicacy of touch which was most commendable.

Mr. Adams, at peace with himself and the world, slept.

Mrs. Hood left during that week. Laurel brought her the precious manuscript and on the day of her departure went with her to the train. Dum remained, to crate the furniture and to read such of Robin's books as were not yet packed. But Robin, as September slipped deliciously into a golden, blue hazy October, windless and clear, stopped on, in the shanty at Winding River.

Long talks, by the fire, and days of tramping and fishing. Only once Wynne asked about the play. Robin, explaining very briefly, was relieved to find the subject immediately dropped and without comment. They were intensely comradely, the two men, silent for long stretches, or again talking hours on end about everything and nothing. Wynne had accepted him so simply, taken it for granted that he would stay on as long as he cared to, sent to the village the day following his arrival for an army cot and dispatched Pedro once or twice to Stonystream for other belongings of Robin's. This was the attitude, the unquestioning kindness, "without a string to it" as the guest put it to himself, which so endeared his host to Robin. Life was so easy, so comfortable, so friendly. But when October was a week old and the trees along the banks were beginning to light their funeral pyres in scarlet and saffron and gold

and the maples were shouting crimson challenges to the bluest sky, Robin grew very restless.

"I suppose I must be getting back to town," he announced, one clear, cold night, as, after Pedro's frugal but satisfying supper, the two men sat before a great fire and smoked their ancient pipes in peace.

"I suppose so. But any time you want to get away from things, come back. I'll be here and we'll leave the cot where it is."

"Thanks." Robin looked into the fire and wreathed his dark head in clouds of smoke. "I'll remember that. I haven't said much about what flung me to your doorstep in the middle of the night, have I? I didn't have to. You knew. But I can see things a little more dispassionately now and it is time I got back to mother. I've been selfish, I reckon."

"Grief is always selfish," generalized the older man, "and grief plus youth is doubly so. I told you I would some day tell you my own story. It's very simple—"

He lapsed into silence and then went on, without a change of expression, in a low, even voice, interrupting himself only to knock out and refill his pipe at intervals.

"I was younger than you when I married. I used to fancy that I had married the spring and the new moon and all the poetry of the dreaming world. She was like that—slender, vital to her finger tips, a wonderful comrade, a wonderful

lover, blonde as young April. My name was not Wynne in those days, perhaps you have guessed that. It was an ordinary name and I was a commonplace young fellow with a little money, a trusted position in a bank and a lot of unnecessary luggage in the way of dreams. I used to write a little even then; even when I was in college. Verse for the most part, now and then a short story, all of them undeveloped, honest things which I read to her during the long Canadian evenings and locked in an old desk by day.

"We were both parentless; there were no relatives to interfere or make claims on us and she had a considerable fortune from her own people. We spent it together, rather gaily. The prettiest house in the small town, the most charming little dinners, a club or two, expensive and exclusive, sports and cards and a trip abroad now and then. I never interfered with her little extravagances; clothes and gew-gaws and household luxuries—her money was her own and I had my small legacy and a smaller salary. Then there was another interest—a boy, a healthy little creature, whom we both adored. Well—it began when he was quite little—perhaps she wanted more money to spend, perhaps I wanted to show her how much more I could give her—at all events I began to speculate a little. It went very well at first—there were more dinners and a larger house—a governess for the boy and jewels for the hands of his mother, jewels for her young, white throat. Then, the smash. I couldn't tell her.

We had been playmates so long, we had never been quite partners. So I took what wasn't mine. I wouldn't ask her for her poor little fortune. I was that much of a proud young fool—I preferred to steal. . . . That was a black period, horrible nights and day when the sun seemed too bright to bear, and all the time the little dinners and the friendly people and the boy just going to school and coming to me with all his little puzzles—and the effort of having to be gay and happy and wise. When it all came out, it looked very much as if I would not see the light again, not for a number of years. But she came forward with what she had in the bank and in the deposit boxes and saved me. So that her son would not be branded with a felon father, she said. It was hushed up, it had never really gotten beyond the bank officials, the bank was repaid to the last cent and I was free to move on and begin all over again. Then she made the bargain with me. 'Go, and never let me see you again.' She gave me certain very sound reasons. The chief reason was then seven years old. And she did not divorce me, she did not believe in divorce.

"We were very young and very bitter and loved each other too much not to be cruel and too little to be kind. I went my way and she hers. And I made my own bargain with her.—It must eventually be supposed that I died on a trip to the Orient. At least that was what I demanded. And I took another name. She moved away, and I keep in

touch with her through her lawyer, an old friend of us both, who was with us all through the fracas, who had offered me what he had, who urged us to stay together. She does not write me, nor I her. But once a year, he does, and tells me that she is well. But not where she is. It was he who told me that the boy had died—in the royal flying corps. That is why, when I met you first and you told me you had been an aviator during the War, I was so startled. I imagine he must have been something like you are, Robin, he would have been about your age—only he was fair, like his mother. . . .

“Well—perhaps if I had waited, not taken her at her word, gone away for a little time only—who knows? I left her at all events and went to the far corners of the world and stayed there for ten years, my only communication with home being through the man of whom I have spoken. Out there, the plays began to come to me, there I first laboriously wrote. I came back with my new name and a very different appearance, and things started to go my way. I have made a good deal of money in the last few years. I made it for my boy, if he would take it. She would never touch it, I know that. Now it is of no use. So much lead. And for another ten years I have lived here. We are all much alike under given circumstances. That night, that distant, never-forgotten night, I took a hammer and broke open my desk. The key was there—but the hammer was better—and I burned, be-

fore her eyes, the poor little poems that I had, haltingly, written out of a happiness too great for me to bear in silence. I have never attempted a line of verse since then. It is just as well . . .”

Robin was silent. His heart was very bitter toward that unknown woman who had failed his friend. After all, thought young Robin, John Wynne had been dishonest only with bits of paper and silver; but his wife had been dishonest with Love; and she had robbed him of his son. Robin found that very difficult to forgive.

Wynne, drawing on a dead pipe, spoke again.

“Intolerant. Each of us was that. I told you once that I had not been easy to live with. I demanded too complete a possession, never realizing that we might be lovers and comrades and still not yet husband and wife. The eventual catastrophe might have made us so, welded us into one forever. Sometimes a mutual burden of shame and atonement will accomplish that miracle by some strange alchemy—only, in this case, it failed to do so. Either she loved me too little or she loved me too much to bear the sight of me, off a pedestal; too much, in that case with her pride and her brain and not enough with her heart and her comprehension. I am older now, I see things in a rather different light. And she? As she lives, she is older also and must have suffered—or grown hard.”

“You think she is alive then?” Robin asked very diffidently.

Wynne looked up quickly from his sombre contemplation of the dying flames, flickering in the fireplace.

"Yes, I know it. I still hear from our friend. I have, through him, urged her to take her freedom, many times. But she will not. She is of the type of women who marry—once. But had I not heard from him, and she had died, I would know it, I would not need to be told."

Robin nodded. He dimly understood. Wynne, leaning forward to knock out his ashes against the fire screen, turned to look at him;

"So you see," he said, "how many of us are putty in the hands of the beloved. Putty, or base clay. I envy you. You have all your life before you and you have, in back of you, a stainless and honest record. Nothing has really happened to you except the knowledge that a girl who did not love you, jilted you. An ugly word, a true word, as many ugly words are true. Some day there will be another girl. You do not like to hear that, now, because you know in your heart that it is also true, with a different truth. And a truth which hurts your pride. This Elaine of yours, she was not real. She was a star you followed; a dream under summer skies. And you can thank your God on your knees that she was not your wife."

"Laurel said something that night, like that," said Robin suddenly, "she said, 'she was not yours. She never was.'"

"Laurel?"

Robin explained and Wynne nodded, smiling a little.

"I remember your speaking of her now," said Wynne, "a wise little girl, and I should judge, a very good friend of yours."

"She's all right," said Robin gloomily. "Sometimes I think she was in love with—the other fellow."

But, to that, Wynne, his smile deepening, said nothing.

In the morning Robin left. He had planned to paddle the canoe back to Stonystream, Pedro would follow with such of his belongings as he wished to take to town with him. He started early, up to his ears in a white sweater, his head bare to the crisp electric air. Wynne, on the dock, waved a comprehensive hand at the riot of autumnal coloring.

"Earth goes *suttée*," he said, "for her Lover, the Summer—but she will rise again from her embers and open her warm, fickle heart to the Spring—"

He took Robin's hand and closed his own firmly over it.

"Come back," he said, "in happiness or sorrow."

"Thank you," said Robin, "and I can't thank you—enough. I will write from town—will you answer?"

Wynne nodded;

"Yes. I will answer. And now, goodbye, good luck, and good hunting, Little Brother."

Robin stepped into the canoe, tossed his hand,

palm up, in a gesture of farewell. "Goodbye," he called, "God bless you."

He turned the canoe toward Stonystream and dipped his paddle into the blue cold water. The bright drops ran from the edge and tinkled back on the ruffled bosom of the river. As he slid between the high courageous trees, the light craft dancing to wave and wind and stroke, as he smelled the smoke and wet leaf odors of Autumn, as he turned at the bend and paused there to look back once more and to wave to the big patient figure standing on the little dock, Robin's heart was light within him. Sore, certainly, and empty enough, but no longer freighted with that heavy burden of despair.

CHAPTER XIII

"NEWS IN BRIEF"

*The youngest thing that ever bowed
Her solemn head above a pad
And scribbled, through a rosy cloud
Black little pothooks, pert and glad.*

"Briardell School,
"Briardell, New York.

"Jerry dear,

"You didn't write me as often as you might have done down at the Springs. I'd come floating in from tennis or golf and rush up to the mail clerk with a pleading look in my eye, but for the most part I merely drew an apologetic smile and a blank—where you were concerned. I had one letter from Laurel. She didn't say much. But now your last has been forwarded to me here and I am all agog at the news. Of course I suspected it—that time we saw—but I beg your pardon—that time we didn't see Elaine and Etienne doing the Love Lorn by the Lake! Well—'the king is dead, etc.' I always had an idea that Elaine could get just about what she wanted. (I'm darned glad she didn't want you—hard—for long!) And I'm wondering if, sometime, she won't pay up a little for having lived on Easy Street so long and letting everyone else do her dirty work. . . .

"You asked me if I had a good time at Hot Springs. Sure I did. Good golf and tennis and riding and all that, rotten movies and GRAND dancing. I copped me a coupla real Tango Teasers and a good time was had by all. . . . But somehow, they all had patent leather hair and a weary look and—I liked Stony-stream better. I wish you had been with, me Jerri-mine-ah!

"School just school. I think this year should really finish up my marvellous education and all that. I'll be nineteen in the Spring—but mother seems to think I've yet another year to accomplish. If I manage to bluff 'em into keeping me that long, it will be a marvellous thing. I shall go in for hockey this year—and it occurs to me I had better let my hair grow. It will look sorter rugged for a while, not to say mangy, but in the long run it will be more dignified and all that—and after all—long hair's more dangerous than short! I long to shed hairpins again in my neighbor's soup.

"Write me, misanthrope! How is college? Tell me all about it. When do I get your picture?

"Love and all that,

"JANE."

"Dartmouth,

"Dear Jane,

"You don't date 'em, why should I? I am sending you a banner to liven up your nunnery and a picture. I don't think much of the picture. They still put your neck in a steel clamp back in Stony-stream. . . . But maybe I'll have one taken here.

"I've gone out for Freshman football—baseball too—why not go the whole hog? After I land something

in the way of a sweater I'll have the picture taken of that. . . .

"It's great up here. My roommate, Tim Andrews, is a wonderful fellow. Big and dark, about six two. All the girls fall for him.

"Glad you had a time at Hot Springs. The trailers don't sound too good to me somehow. Be a good little girl and study hard. How is your mother? Give her my love when you write.

"Yours,
"JERRY."

"Briardell,

"Jerry dear,

"Thanks for the banner and the picture. Don't like the Patter much either. You look like a human sacrifice. But I am glad to have it. Great fun up here, tramps and hockey and basket ball, and all that. And you never saw such coloring in the hills—the school is high up, you know, and you can see for miles around. So far I have managed to know my lessons and keep out of trouble. Saturday I'm meeting the Mommer in town for matinee and all that. Couldn't you make New York some Saturday? Why not, if not?

"My roommate, Sally Carter, accent and all (can't you see the good old fashioned Southern Colonial House and the darkies clustered on the door step playing Abolition Blues on zithers—well, you can't. She comes from Wellesley, Mass., and her accent is nearer Cape Cod than Old Point—). Anyway, Sally has a cousin in the Freshman class at Dartmouth. Name's Carter, too, Jim. How about it? Threatens

to come and see her one day and fifty percent of the school has seen his picture and is buying curlers—.

“Study-hour draws near. Jerry, I do miss you!

“Love,

“JANE.”

“Dartmouth,

“Dear Jane,

“Met your friend’s friend Carter. Nice boy. Long, curly lashes, though, don’t believe he’ll get far on the gridiron. Say, do the girls honestly hang out of the windows when a man comes calling up there? He says he’s been to girls’ schools before and that’s about all they do. What a lot of idiots they must be. If I ever catch you with your head out of the window looking for a strange man, I’ll shut the window and bob it!

“Yours,

“JERRY.”

Telegram to Mr. Jerry Jones, student at Dartmouth College.

“Briardell,

“I suppose you think you’re funny?

“JANE.”

“Dartmouth,

“Dear Jane,

“I *know* I am funny. My history professor told me so this morning. Every one saw the joke but me.

“Say, you weren’t really peeved, were you? But you ought to hear this guy Carter rave about ‘Girls

I Have Met.' Pretty good. His dear little cousin Sally has been giving him an envelope-full about you and I had the devil's own time to persuade him that you had red hair, green eyes, a squint, a game leg and would stop any clock, to order. When he comes around I hide all the snapshots of you and rely solely on verbal pictures. I hope I have succeeded in scaring him away. Honestly, he has Tom Meighan lashed to the mast for eyelashes. And—well, I can't get to New York often. . . . All's fair, you know.

"Yours,
"JERRY."

"Briardell,
"Jerry,

"No, I wasn't mad, but I sorter like to stir you up, you know. You all get sluggish after a while like gold fish in warm water. I don't want to meet the Eyelash Wonder. I have no use for handsome men. They always hog the mirrors. Charlie Chaplin is my ideal in the movies; or maybe Will Rogers.

"I have written Laurel but haven't heard again. The more I think about it the worse the whole thing seems. Robin is too much of a peach to get the raspberry that way; and Etienne is too. That's subtle, isn't it! But I have a lil' old grudge against Elaine. For—you see—you don't *dare* tell me I am the only girl you ever loved.

"Sorrowfully,
"JANE."

Telegram to Miss Jane Van Wyck, Briardell School.

"Dartmouth,

"Oh, don't I! But you are.

"JERRY."

"Briardell,

"Jerry dear,

"You are really awfully sweet. Although of course you never HAVE told me. Still, we will let it go at that. I shall be in New York over Thanksgiving. Verbum Sap. Now run to your Latin teacher.

"Love,

"JANE."

"12 West 50th Street, New York City,

"November 1st.

"My dear Jerry,

"In case your family can spare you, Jane and I would be very happy if you would spend the week end of Thanksgiving with us here in town. I plan a little dancing party for Jane on Saturday night. If it is not possible for you to come Thursday, do come Friday. We will have our Thanksgiving dinner Thursday evening at seven thirty and go afterwards to the theatre. I hope you are well and enjoying your first taste of college. I hear much of you from Jane.

"With affectionate regard,

"NAIDA VAN WYCK."

"Dartmouth, November 3rd.,

"Dear Mrs. Van Wyck,

"I have arranged to eat two turkeys. One with my people at noon Thanksgiving Day and another with you that evening. You knew I'd come didn't you?

And shall I bring evening clothes or just a tux? Are they being very dressy this year in New York? And thank you loads for asking me. I find it's going to be awfully hard to wait. . . .

“Sincerely,
“JERRY.”

CHAPTER XIV

INTERLUDE—AND AUNT SAMANTHA

*Summer, knowing she must die
Lights, against a cloudless sky
Trees, to speed her soul with flame;
Sumach fires creeping low
Where the winds of Autumn blow,
Calling on her name.*

It seemed to Laurel that this autumnal period must last forever. It was more like a comma than a period; a sweet, wistful pause between two seasons, remarkable for fair weather and cloudless skies, a time for quietude and serenity. The house next door was, finally, closed and even Dum had disappeared with, it is to be supposed, a book under his arm and his bow-rimmed spectacles slipping perilously, as always, down his yellow nose. From a window one day, Laurel had seen Robin enter the house, there had been manifest sudden signs of activity, and about four o'clock that afternoon a key was turned and the car purred out of the garage. Robin, with Dum as his sole companion, was off to town. Laurel had leaned dangerously far from her window, but Robin had not looked up nor back. She had had a momentary glimpse

of his face. Now, remembering it, she was made comforted and happy . . . he had looked so well, so young. . . .

She had frequent word from Mrs. Hood. And in some fashion, as links in chains, as part of one another as a picture puzzle, as haunting as minor music, the golden days went by, peaceful and quite uneventful, save when Etienne ran down for a night or two and Adams House came alive to love and laughter once more. Then, abruptly, just as Laurel had begun to fancy that Time had stopped, with the hands of the clock pointing to Autumn, came a change; grey skies, a flurry of brave snow, and the heroic efforts of the sun to rout the vanguards of Winter. After a week of skirmishing, retreat, and advances, the conqueror came in with a three days' storm to herald him. Rising, on a December morning, Laurel looked out on a sheeted earth, on bare brown trees dripping gleaming icicles from their twisted finger tips. Twisted with rheumatism, she thought, whimsically. And the sky was white with scudding clouds which a shrill barking wind drove as a dog drives sheep. It was, conveniently, a Saturday and the childhood of Stonystream rushed to the banked roads, mittened and sweated, tugging their gay sleds. Hillcrest, that aristocratic eminence, was alive with shrieking young democracy and all the hills and roads blossomed out fantastically in flowers of red and blue wool and in still odder blossoms of painted wood.

From the kitchen of Adams House there issued forth an odor, spicy and warm, which informed Laurel, via her inquisitive little nose, that no matter what she had fancied, Time continued on schedule and Christmas was a matter of only a few days distant. Jerry came home, on a visit more enthusiastic than lengthy, and dropped in to see them all, Christmas afternoon. He was, none too scrupulously, dividing his vacation between Stonystream and New York. And Etienne came too, bringing with him a prodigious number of unique and lovely gifts. There was, in his Christmas bundle, a circlet of diamond stars for Elaine's yellow hair, delicate things set in mere breaths of platinum, so that she should look like a "buttercup with the dew on it," he explained. It companioned, in design, the curious and beautiful betrothal ring he had given her. For Laurel, he had brought wonderful editions of the songs she loved best, bound in soft suède with her initials stamped on each volume, and the stone she loved best, a single black opal, pendant from a gossamer-fine chain. To Laurel also came a box of books from Mrs. Hood and an affectionate, rather lonely letter. Robin was away so much, she wrote—Canada, the Adirondacks, Lake Placid—and, every so often, Winding River—toward the end she said,

"John Wynne seems to fascinate him, but I can't demur as he returns to me from each and every visit to him in better, braver spirits, with a demon for work inside of him. I have given him the

carbons of the play. He said nothing, but flushed, poor boy, to the roots of his hair. Once he remarked, apropos of nothing, in our conversation, 'What a melodramatic young fool Laurel must think me!' If he can say that, and say it sincerely, he is surely on the high road to heart health. When you come to town in January for Mr. de Gabriac's concert, cannot you stay over for a time with me? I do not suppose Robin will be here and despite my many friends in New York, I seem to be so much alone."

Etienne's concert, as predicted, was a tremendous success. Adams House attended *en masse*, applauding furiously from a stage box. And Elaine, with her stars shining in her hair and brighter stars in her eyes, looked like a water nymph in palest green; a bewitched water nymph, who spoke as from some strange and secret dream and who moved with a dream-like dignity beside her lover as they, later, stood together after the concert in the artists' reception room and vaguely heard the chatter and hum of congratulation all about them.

Adams House stayed in town that night and in the morning Etienne went back to Stonystream, with Mrs. Adams and Elaine, and Mr. Adams delivered Laurel at the Hood apartment, before going to his office. She remained there, with Mrs. Hood, for a quiet and happy week, and at the end of it, saw Robin. Surely, like the icing on the cake, she told herself.

He had come in from a fortnight of golf at Pinehurst looking quite an inch broader and half an

inch taller, and met Laurel with frank pleasure written all over his brown face. But he did not stay long with the two women in the sunny living room, which so beautifully overlooked the park. After a few minutes of casual, and friendly, general conversation, he went to his own quarters and returned from them in an hour's time with a stack of letters. One was from a theatrical manager of artistic repute, business integrity and charming personality, an encouraging six lines giving Robin a coveted appointment. Another came from Wynne and this last Robin handed gaily to his mother with instructions to read it aloud.

Obediently, Mrs. Hood read the few words scrawled in a striking hand on cheap copy paper;

“My dear boy;

“I have written Warren Richard about ‘*The Endless Chain*’ and presume by now that he has had your Mss., and has perhaps already made an appointment to see you. I am sure that something will come of this meeting. He prefers plays in a semi-polished condition and likes to have an artistic finger in the final baking of the pie. I think that he will give you, at least, good advice, and possibly, a contract, and I sincerely hope for the latter. A word of warning; let him do the talking. And when he has done it, come down to Winding River and report to your friend,

“JOHN WYNNE.”

“How splendid!” said Laurel, looking from mother to son, as Mrs. Hood laid the letter aside.

"Oh, Robin, I do hope with all my heart that this means the first rung of the ladder for you, the beginning of a tremendously successful career!"

Robin nodded his thanks and Mrs. Hood, rising, went over to him where he lounged in a great easy chair, and pulled a lock of his thick hair;

"You'll be growing away from your old mother when you're famous and all of that," she said laughingly, but to Laurel's sensitive ears the words fell with a little note of unconscious sorrow, all the more pathetic because it was the sorrow of resignation. Leaving that afternoon for Adams House, Laurel made the short journey without once opening any of the magazines Robin had urged upon her at the station. She was aware of an emotional heartache, a depression of spirits, a lessening of courage. She wondered a little if Mrs. Hood were jealous of the gift that must inevitably some day remove Robin from her? If she, his own mother, whom he so cherished, had come to feel that very human regret that all relationships, even the closest, must have their changes, great and small, how much more deeply must Laurel feel it; Laurel, feeding on the dry husks of Robin's casual friendship? For a little hour, when his love dream had ended, he had turned to her, his friend, as he, perhaps, could not have turned even to his mother. But that was over now—he seemed further away than ever. And Laurel, honest Laurel, realized, quite clearly, that it was because she had meant so little to him, that he had allowed her to see him in

the very depths of his despair. She had been, to him at that moment, a symbol, rather than a person.

When she reached home and had greeted her family she went straight to her room on the plea of unpacking. Elaine was out, she would have an hour to herself. Part of it she employed in writing down some of the things which troubled her.

"Robin," she cried out to the unseeing eyes, the unhearing ears, and by the medium of untidy splashes of ink on a blotted bit of paper. "Robin, don't leave us *altogether*, your mother and I! Come back to us, sometimes, and be as you used to be, merry-hearted and gay, with the little teasing ways we loved. Strange, how they have conspired to take you from those who love you most: Elaine who does not want you at all, John Wynne who seems to need something of your youth, and your work, that impersonal god, which demands your all. Elaine is eliminated now; but if John Wynne should desert you, if your work should fail you and you should come back to us, you would find us waiting, Robin. Your mother and Laurel. For we love you."

She slipped out of doors in the biting, evening wind and stood on tiptoe to add the letter to the package in the apple tree, a package now securely and most practically wrapped up against wet and snow. And then, feeling oddly lighter at heart, came back again to the warmth and lamplight of Adams House.

February came in more like a vast eiderdown

coverlet than a month. The thick dry snow lay six feet high in the drift and Laurel in rubber boots, breeches and a sturdy Mackinaw, went stumbling joyously around the hills; falling into yielding masses of what looked like cotton and felt like ice cream; clambering out again, to struggle through the wet mysterious woods. On a morning when the little branches of every tree bore an armour coating of ice standing out stiff and sparkling in the pale sunlight, she went for a three-mile tramp through a world that seemed most dazzling and most pure. Toward noon the sky grew suddenly overcast, the sun withdrew his courageous bayonet of light, and Laurel, turning toward home, found herself the solitary inhabitant of a grey land, a land of sleep and cold serenity, grey sky, grey hills, grey water, the outlines all drowsy and blurred and running together like a smudged drawing.

She was late for lunch, of course, and arrived damp and chilled, with scarlet cheeks and great drops of moisture clinging to her curly hair and eyelashes. When she stamped the snow from her heavy boots, on the door-step and scraper, she was amazed to note that her small feet, in their woolen stockings, were almost devoid of all sensation.

Elaine was not home for luncheon but Mrs. Adams had a caller, one who greeted Laurel with open arms and drew her to an ample bosom, wet clothes and all.

"My aunt!" said Laurel, between jesting and sobriety, between pleasure and astonishment,

“when on earth did you get back to the home town?”

Mrs. Samantha Holsapple, known to her townsfolk as “The Widow” and “Aunt Samantha” variously, rippled her half dozen chins in a vast comfortable chuckle, delightful to hear and amazing in its effect.

“Last night,” she answered, “and maybe I’m not glad. No more gadding around for me. I’d be losing weight at it if I kept it up. Run and change your duds, childie, you’re wet to the skin. After lunch, we’ll have a real good visit.”

Laurel ran dutifully to her room, much diverted by the new arrival. Mrs. Holsapple was at one and the same time the bane and blessing of Stonystream. Of heavy good nature and with means as lavish as her waistband, she was never the less a masterful woman, who knew her mind and spoke it out, aloud, on all and sundry occasions. No one seemed clearly to recall her deceased husband, although it was as fixed as the day-star that, at some time or another, she had possessed one. As a matter of fact, the departed Zeneas, now resting under a massive monument in Stonystream cemetery, had been a little, neutral person of the type difficult to remember when living, and impossible to recall when dead. He had stood five foot five to his wife’s five foot nine, and had weighed a scant one hundred and twenty, while his Samantha carried with inexpressible dignity, the fleshy burden of some eighty pounds more. And “The Widow,”

childless and husbandless, had more than once endeavored to tempt Laurel away from her aunt and uncle, had even offered on more than one occasion legally to adopt her. From the time Laurel had arrived in Stonystream, a wistful thing, all eyes, in the pallor and black of her bereavement, Aunt Samantha had loved her. It was really Laurel who drew her back to Stonystream and her gloomy old house, after more than six months spent visiting relatives in a Western State. Laurel, speeding downstairs by way of the banisters, was, in her turn, aware that Aunt Samantha with her marvelous, homely philosophy, her great heart and her quick tongue was just what she had needed for a longer time than she had realized. She had missed her—and had not known it in the rush of events which in no wise concerned themselves with Mrs. Holsapple.

After lunch, while Mrs. Adams immersed herself upstairs in the hope chest, Aunt Samantha had a word or two to speak.

“Laurel,” she said, rocking madly in a walnut chair with red velvet upholstery and a crocheted tidy. “Laurel, what on earth’s come over you?”

On a hassock, at her feet, Laurel looked up inquiringly.

“What do you mean—just?” she asked evasively.

The shrewd little black eyes, twinkling from a mass of rosy flesh, regarded her, and Aunt Samantha’s curiously small mouth set firmly.

"Peaked," she announced, "peaked and pin-dling. That's what you are. Your fine color don't deceive me none. You got that, running out of doors this morning. Don't deny it. You're ailing. Have they been working you to death, baby?"

Laurel laid her hand on the vast black silk lap.

"Imagination," she said, "it's running off with you. Nonsense. Of course not. Naturally, we all have a good deal to do with the wedding so near—"

"Humph!" remarked Mrs. Holsapple, off at a tangent, "how about this wedding? And this beau of Elaine's? French, I hear. Well, she'll have her hands full," prophesied the lady darkly. "Tell me all about it. Your aunt's in such an almighty flutter that she don't make sense with two words after another. Of course I heard something—though you were pretty discreet in your letters, others weren't—and I know all about the man she jilted and this one bouncing in before the other fellow had fairly shed his prospective bridegroom's shoes. Out with it, Laurel."

Laurel, complying, "outed" with it the best she could and told the story as briefly as possible. She was uncomfortably aware that the little eyes saw more than they were intended to see. Lingered unconsciously over Robin's very name, catching herself up after the betrayal and hastening on with a heightened colour, Laurel began to wonder, miserably, if the entire tale of her love was printed all over her face. At the conclusion;

"Well," consented Aunt Samantha, rocking faster than ever, "she'll get just what she deserves. Mark my words, Laurel, for they're as true as Gospel. She'll get what she deserves, Elaine will. No more. No less. Have you any plans?"

Laurel looked up in some surprise. The thought had not yet occurred to her that it was necessary for her to have any plans—of her own.

"Why no," she answered. "Has Aunt Frances said anything? I mean about Uncle George wanting to go to New York after Elaine is married, closing up this house, and moving? He had been talking of it, but I can't say that it is actually settled, as yet."

"Fanny seems to think so," said Aunt Samantha. "And how you'd hate that, Laurel! You'd pine away. I did. New York's dreadful. I lost three pounds in the two weeks I spent there. Awful place, fit only for those who haven't the good sense to get away from it. Listen to me, Laurel. While I was away on this fool's errand of mine, the folks who hired the Main Street store gave up their lease. I'm thinking of turning it into a lunch and tea place, for people all the year round and for those in automobiles who pass through here seasons when the Inn isn't open and have to go on to the next town or stay hungry, as things are now. Come and help me run it and I'll pay you a good salary and some of the profits. You can make your home with me, if George does decide to leave—what idiots men are, aren't they?—I'm all alone

in that big house, Laurel, and I've always wanted you, dear."

Laurel's eyes filled suddenly. There was so much wistfulness in the last few words and well Laurel knew how alone the big woman was, for all her fingers and thumbs in everybody else's pies.

She rose and managed to perch herself on the arm of the burdened rocker;

"If Uncle George should go to town," she said hesitatingly, "and I *could* persuade him and Aunt—"

"Then that's settled!"

Mrs. Holsapple beamed and rose abruptly, an action endangering Laurel's balance.

"I've got to be getting along," she said, "when things come to a head here, let me know. I can talk your Aunt Fanny around and your Uncle George, too. They're dear, silly geese, both of them. And you'll be much better off with me here where you belong now, than in a city—" She snorted suddenly, with some unexplained emotion, and caught Laurel in her great, motherly arms.

To Laurel's amazement she found herself shedding tears on the huge black expanse against which her face was pressed. Instantly Aunt Samantha changed as she felt the girl shudder soundlessly in her arms. Her deep voice grew deeper still, her big hand stroked the bent brown head with infinite tenderness.

"There, there. Don't fret. You come along to Aunt Samantha, and tell her all about it, when-

ever you've a mind to. You know she loves you, baby."

After Mrs. Holsapple had departed, Laurel went to her room to think. She had realized for some weeks that a certain definite problem faced her, but had uncharacteristically refused mentally to cope with it until the time arrived when she should be forced to face the issue. If, as threatened, the Adamses should remove to New York they would expect her to go with them. Perhaps as they were losing Elaine, it would be her duty to go. But her soul revolted. To sit in a strange city cooped up in an apartment, with her hands folded,—no, a thousand times no, she could not. It would be equally difficult to find a position. She had had no real training for economic independence. She knew nothing of the most commonplace solutions, teaching or stenography, was not qualified to fill either situation. Her voice, in its present condition, would be of very little service to her. And she knew that Uncle George would not only be most seriously opposed to her getting any sort of work at all, but that he would be hurt to his very soul if she should announce her intention of so doing. If she went with Aunt Samantha, the building up of the tea room would not seem like work to his man's mind, but an amusing feminine fad, something with which to busy idle hands.

The more she thought, the surer she became that she could not leave Stonystream. It had been her home for a little over four years only,

but to it she had brought all her sacred sorrow, all her memories of the beloved parents; and to it had come Robin, and with Robin, her love for him. Here she had spent the most wonderful and miserable months of her emotional life. She could not leave Stonystream, not of her own free will. If there was any way that led back to it, she would take it. She must stay where her heart was, and her heart was there.

She yearned somewhat over Aunt Samantha. That huge person, so instinct with the mother longing, touched her very closely. Laurel realized suddenly that she was very tired, that her head ached, her heart ached and her brain ached with much here and there of questions and answers. It would be a harbour of peace, that dark, old house of the Holsapples, that house on a high hill, set in the sight of rolling lovely meadows and hedged about with wonderful old trees. It would be fun to put-ter around a teashop with "The Widow"; and it would be ointment on a sore to be, for a little time, away from all the people who reminded her of Robin. She did not want to forget him, she wished most ardently to stop on where he had been, where all inanimate things spoke of him, but woman-like, she wished for a while to be free of those animate creatures gifted with eyes and ears and tongues, possessed of faculties which would constantly force him on her attention.

Well—if Uncle George would consent, she would stay in Stonystream. Meantime the wedding

loomed ahead, as certain, it seemed, as death and taxes; and Laurel, setting her own problem aside, bathed her flushed cheeks and tired eyes and, fetching her work basket, sat down to sew for Elaine.

CHAPTER XV

ELAINE'S GREAT ADVENTURE

*Leave the spinning wheel and leave,
Homely task, familiar ways,
Take farewell, and follow him,
Faithful, all thy little days.*

*Mother, father, sister, friend,
Land that bore you, hearth and street,
Bless and part; and take his hand
Have you need he cannot meet?*

During the rest of winter, a winter which seemed to have established itself for good, Laurel planned and sewed and whispered with Elaine. Elaine was much preoccupied to-day, living for mail times and for the letters that came to her from strange cities, written in a fine, firm foreign hand. Clippings came too, clippings that flushed her with pride and, perhaps, who can say, a faint foreboding? For Etienne's concert tour was a triumphal progress and Elaine knew more surely than ever that possessing Etienne, she would still be forced to share him with his art and with the world. And of them both, she was vaguely jealous.

Laurel, often during the white weeks, took her-

self and her sewing to Aunt Samantha and with her planned for the tea room. There was a certain hard, sweet practicality about Aunt Samantha that discouraged too much dreaming and was like an apple, firm, mature, spicy, into which Laurel could set her teeth. She learned a good deal from Aunt Samantha in those days. And was grateful.

In March she went once more to town, on a wet, slippery day with clouds flying and breaking across a pale blue sky and golden light reflected in every mud puddle. On that day, Laurel saw Mrs. Hood. Robin she did not see and came away wondering if after all she had wanted so much to see him. For although Mrs. Hood said nothing, Laurel guessed much and had, somehow, the impression that when Robin was home at all, which was rarely, he was unapproachable. Something seemed gone out of Robin in his emotional convalescence; and something curious had taken its place. Whatever changes he was going through in his mental life, they had caused him to withdraw into himself to a place that even his mother could not reach.

On that day also, Laurel bought for Elaine her gift of fine linen and shining silver. It ate into her bank balance to an alarming degree and mortgaged her small income for several months to come but she was keenly anxious that Elaine should have something enduring from her, something lovely and rare to match her beauty, something costly enough to have entailed a sacrifice. For, in a

measure, she made the gift in penance—she had had hard thoughts of Elaine.

When the gift came, Elaine accepted it with tears of honest gratitude and with real distress. "Oh, Laurel—you shouldn't have done it? Why did you?" She was plainly touched; but save for such moments of humanity she had become a remote person, and was much occupied with new duties as she was in constant correspondence with Etienne's sister, Adrienne, Lady Wilton, concerning whom Etienne had made gay plans. But the plans were to come to nothing, comparatively speaking, as the vivacious little lady had been unable to attend her brother's concerts, or to take the apartment in town against his marriage, because of certain pressing domestic duties which Etienne, in the first enthusiasm of planning, had forgotten or ignored, even though they impended.

Said duties, of masculine gender and weighing a full eight pounds, arrived toward the end of January and it was then settled that Lady Wilton would courageously undertake the trip to the States in late April and at least "see her little brother properly married." And that, shortly after the wedding, Elaine and Etienne would return to Paris with her.

These plans were, of course, laid out upon the Adams House tapis and thoroughly discussed by all intimately concerned—and by a number who were not. And before April, Mr. Adams had

made up his mind. Stonystream without Elaine held no charms for him; inconsistent person that he was, he ignored the fact that Elaine had often begged him to move to New York for her sake. Now that she was going, he was determined to move; obliquely for her sake, one might say. At all events, New York seemed nearer Paris, more in touch with the mails, and Mr. Adams' firm was thinking of opening branch offices in other cities and surely it was easier to travel, as he would have to do, on tours of inspection, from New York itself. It would seem as if the extra ninety miles suddenly appeared endless to him. One day, if all went well and the branches prospered, Mr. Adams planned to tuck his family under his arm and adventure across those perilous seas between himself and Paris, in order to look with his own eyes at his girl in her new surroundings. He talked over these plans, which he had set for autumn, with all and sundry, and greatly alarmed Mrs. Adams by the idea of uprootal. He might, he considered, find a buyer for Adams House. Somehow, the mere thought seemed a treachery to tradition, but, as he argued with Laurel, he could not maintain two establishments, even though the financial burden of a beautiful daughter, human enough to require food and clothing, was to be lifted from him.

Laurel, opposing, was as firm as Gibraltar.

"Don't *dare* to sell it!" she urged, "shut it up, give it away, rent it, if you must, but never sell Adams House! Adams House it has always been,

Adams House it should, surely, remain. Some day Elaine's sons must come back and learn all that it has to teach them of legend and beauty and endurance. They won't be *all* French, you know!"

Like all fathers, Mr. Adams was a trifle startled by the thought of this contingency. He murmured something to the effect that they could come back to Adams House in the summer and that Elaine might manage to spend summers there. And was thereafter rather silent on the subject of selling and Laurel rested her case.

Robin's play was accepted by the talkative Mr. Richards, and shelved until the autumn. March departed like a cageful of lions and suddenly without much warning it was April and the bluebirds were thinking of making their cheerful, azure appearance on the clean-swept stage of nature. Grey and golden were April's garments, eternally youthful her clear eyes, and Laurel's heart took a little upward leap with the return of spring. It is hard to be completely sad in the spring, and as hard to be completely happy!

Shortly before Elaine's wedding, Laurel took the last bit of sewing to Mrs. Holsapple's and discussed with her, as they sat together on a glassed-in veranda, the relative charms of pink or blue ribbons. They talked of the proposed tea-house and of the finally decided autumn removal of the Adamses. They talked of Elaine and Etienne, whom Aunt Samantha had now met, and to whom she was reconciled, for it would have been a very

stony-hearted woman indeed who did not fall under his gay and Gallic spell.

"It will seem too strange to have her married—and away from us," Laurel said, wistfully. "I'll never get used to it."

"Indeed you will," Mrs. Holsapple contradicted her, wisely, her busy fingers flying here and there on the mysterious demands of tatting. "We get used to everything. In another year you'll forget she wasn't *born* married; that's how used you'll be to her new standing in the community. Few things last, least of all, newness."

Laurel laid her sewing in her lap, and looked away over the hills, faintly and delicately green.

"Marriage," she said, pondering aloud "—the great adventure."

"Don't you believe it!" said her hostess, as the tatting flew faster, "up until you're married it's the great adventure. After—well, it's just give and take and a narrow road that is wider than all the world. It's not so much an adventure as a life work, Laurel!"

Elaine's wedding day dawned clear and very fragrant. Adams House had been in town for several days prior to the event, as Adrienne had arrived with two nurses, the baby and two maids, one of whom she announced she would give to Elaine as a wedding present. She brought with her, her husband's love and welcome and his "desolation" that he was not able to attend the wedding, the greater urgency of the diplomatic

service holding him fast in Paris. There were jewels for Elaine in Adrienne's trunks, delicate linen and laces made by the patient French nuns in some ancient grey cloister, woven in the austere stillness of passionless peace, to grace just such a bridal occasion as this. Laurel, looking at these marvels, felt a quick pang of pity for the women who had fashioned them, seeing with her romance-loving eyes the tragic contrast between their lives and the luxurious bits of finery they had labored over; these women who would know no earthly bridal. And, pitying, she was half-envious of the resignation and the renunciation they had—as far as the world knew—accomplished. Also in Adrienne's trunks was the rose point veil and train that Etienne's mother had worn upon her wedding day, and in Paris there were other gifts, waiting the hands of the new mistress; gifts of silver and ancient furniture and wonderful things from Etienne's many friends. Adrienne was frankly charmed by her new sister and in the three days they spent together, before the wedding, was rarely absent from her side. She found her beauty exquisite, her carriage gracious and dignified, her appearance, as she told Laurel, "that of an angel who is still somewhat of the world." Lady Wilton and Laurel were soon firm friends and chattered together like school-girls, while, to Elaine's parents, Adrienne was charming. She, herself, was small and dark, with Etienne's eyes, in shape and color, but gay where his were grave, and her little, pointed, heart-shaped

face was piquant and delightful without actual beauty; a little pert, a trifle *gamine*. But she had dignity for all her lack of inches and her love of mischief, and the sweetest adoration of her gifted brother. She exhibited to her new relatives half a dozen pictures of the huge, blond Englishman to whom she was so happily mated, and was frankly and emotionally homesick for him, and as plainly infatuated by her big blond son, who with unconquerable good humor stolidly bore the trials of travel and the anxieties of his nurses and mother without a murmur.

"He is all English," Adrienne would say. "But all! Not one little look of me, not one little French trait. And he is a monster for size. At twenty, he will put me in his pocket and be off to England to marry a nice pink girl with big feet!" And her small mouth drooped whimsically at the corners at the picture a lively imagination had painted. "But how dull she will be!" she added dolefully.

Adrienne had not found it feasible to take an apartment as had originally been planned. And to have the wedding in Adams House, she had written during the winter, would be too much of a bother and an "upset" for every one. So, announcing in her final cables that she would stay three weeks and three weeks only, she made arrangements, overriding every one, to have her brother married from a private suite in the hotel where she had engaged her rooms. Mr. and Mrs. Adams had been, secretly, a little ruffled at the high standard ways of Etienne's

unknown—and therefore alarming—sister. But when they met her at the boat and felt her little, nervous hands in theirs, and saw the facile, bright tears on the dark cheeks, they were completely won over. And so it happened, all of it, just as she had planned.

Elaine and Etienne were married from the Ritz, by a dignitary of Etienne's church, as, owing to the difference in creed, they could not have been married in the Cathedral. And Elaine looked like nothing so much in the world as a tall arum lily; velvety, stately, in her white garments, sister lilies in her pale long hands, lace and chiffon clouding her high-held daffodil head.

Laurel, her one attendant, saw and heard very little of the solemn, lovely service. She was so glad for Elaine, so glad for Etienne, tall and strange with his white face and rapt, triumphant eyes. But in her own heart, covered by the lilacs she carried, there was a heavy ache of loneliness and regret.

There were only a dozen people at the wedding. Jerry, of course, and Jane and Mrs. Holsapple who had pantingly made the trip determined to see Elaine safely married if the inconvenience of travel should kill her, and with the closest friends of the Adamses were one or two of Etienne's American comrades. After the ceremony there was a breakfast and toasts were drunk and speeches made and Adrienne and Mrs. Adams cried comfortably, and not unhappily, in each other's arms, while

Elaine's father, smiting his new son on the back, made odd noises in his throat and winked small, honest eyes rapidly. But Etienne understood and gave the promise that every father wants to hear, —“I will cherish her, father, love her and guard her all my life long.”

Presently it was all over. Etienne and Elaine had gone away for ten days, to the rooms in Hot Springs that had been reserved for them for months, and Adrienne and her ménage were established in Adams House to await until the “adventurers” returned. Laurel, adopting the French baby, to the consternation of the disapproving nurses, one English and the other Breton, found some comfort in her loneliness, but knew an increasing weight of regret.

Then they were home again, for a short time; Etienne filling the house with laughter and music, teasing his sister, spoiling the baby, almost “outside of himself” as his sister said, with happiness, and Etienne's wife, very proud and very humble, always at his side.

This for a few days, and then, the eventual parting.

In May, Elaine sailed for her new home with all her new world beside her and Adams House seemed stilled.

CHAPTER XVI

LAUREL MAKES A FRIEND

Sing, little feathered one, Spring's in the making!
(Give over, heart, with your sorrow and break-
ing.)

Bird in the tree top, heart in the breast,
Sing in the new moon of hope and unrest.

or

Open your heart to pain and bid her come.
Blind with her tears, and with her knowledge
dumb;
See with her sealed eyes, learn her silent speech,
Love's little sister, pain—she has much to teach.

Walking idly through the wet, brown woods with their first feathery foam of green, John Wynne wondered why the poets had long appeared to prefer June to May. There was a newness about May, he thought, a purity that the more full blown month, in some degree, lacked, as the open petals of a rose lack the dewy wonder of the bud. He drew a long breath of the cool, untainted air and felt younger than he had for many years. He laid this at Robin's door rather than at May's.

He had just had a most enthusiastic letter from the younger man, he might expect him any day now, to-morrow, next week, on one of his flying, laughing, inspiring visits. Wynne paused by a tree to light his pipe. As the tobacco glowed red in the caked bowl, he reflected that, all unconsciously, he was "coming out of his shell." Robin had put it that way and had said that it was "high time." Had even brought, on his last visit, another boy with him, quite without permission but sure of Wynne's welcome of any of his friends. . . . Wynne smiled at the recollection . . . the stranger had proved so likeable, so young . . . he had been sorry when he left.

The woods were very thick, at the point Wynne had reached, and were crisscrossed by innumerable small paths, each with that fascination which only a wood path that has no apparent beginning or end can hold for the explorer. The branches, not much later in the season, would meet over head and the place would become populous with people from the Inn. Just now Wynne was alone in a wonderful, breathing, quiet world with the pale, morning sunlight of May in a little, gleaming pool at his feet. The solitude was charming; he rejoiced and in the next breath found himself regretting that Robin was not with him to share it and turn it into the solitude of two congenial spirits. He sighed, and the sound was answered nearby by the light sound of footsteps among the leaves on a path, the brushing of garments against the trees. Wynne's ears,

the quick ears of a man who has lived alone in the wild places, placed the direction of the sound at once, and, as he listened, the steps drew nearer and he heard the clear voice of a woman speaking to some one—no, probably a dog. The voice, with some quality of laughter running through it, pleased him, as he stood there uncertain whether to go or stay. In another moment the unseen person had stopped, there was a noiseless pause and then the lovely sound of singing.

Wynne listened, no longer inclined to steal away before he should have met this unknown intruder. His heart beat very quickly, sheer wonder and admiration tightening his throat. She was singing in English, an old ballad, all little falls and curious minor notes, and the creamy contralto drifted to him between the trees, appealing and poignant. She sang the song through, with its repeated burden of longing and farewell and when she had finished, he stood quite still, waiting until it should please her to sing again. Presently she did so, walking toward him as she sang, and in a moment she had stepped out into the small, cleared spot among the trees where he stood waiting for her, and stopped, startled, a lean, grey police dog at her heels.

Wynne saw a girl in her middle twenties, small and round, with great, grey eyes, set wide in a rosy little face; the sunlight making copper shadows and high, golden lights in her soft, uncovered, brown hair. He saw, also, the humor and tragedy in her generous, mobile mouth, the sweetness lurk-

ing in dimpled deep corners, and noted the full, tanned throat above a low-cut, neutral tinted sweater, small sturdy feet under a short skirt and a strong, long-fingered hand clasping an improvised walking stick. She had the deep chest of the singer, a straight back and broad, boyish shoulders and looked, he thought, whimsically, like a stocky little Shetland pony, although he had no sooner made the mental comparison than he regretted its unflattering import.

"Oh," said Laurel, startled but unembarrassed, "I thought I was all alone."

"I am glad you were not," said Wynne, smiling, surprised into graceful speech, "for you have given May a voice."

Laurel, looking at the chance-met stranger more closely, speculated as to his identity, and a phrase descriptive of just such an unusual looking man as the one before her, flashed through her mind. On an impulse she stepped closer to him and on the same friendly impulse, spoke;

"You're Robin's Mr. Wynne!" she stated, thinking aloud.

The smile deepened, grew very kind.

"I admit it. And that," he added, pointing to Poilu, who was dancing around him, rubbing his great head against his side, "is Robin's dog. Do not deny it! He knows me. Where did you get him, minstrel maiden?"

Robin's dog raised a muddy paw as if for silence. Laurel laughed.

"Bad manners. Poilu, come here!" she ordered, and with her hand on the dog's collar, said, in explanation. "He couldn't stand the city, so Mrs. Hood persuaded Robin to send him to me for a time."

"Why not to me?" asked Wynne. "He's a man's dog."

"Oh, do you think so? But I asked for him," she said simply.

They were walking on now, unconsciously side by side, and Laurel looked up at the big man beside her, aware that some amenity on her part had been lacking.

"I'm Laurel Dale, from Stonystream," she said, to supply the omission.

"I guessed as much," Wynne responded. "And now, Miss Laurel, tell me what you are going to do with your wonderful gift for making people feel sixteen again—and almost happy?"

"You mean my voice?" She puzzled for a moment and then looked at him frankly, with a quaint seriousness shadowing eyes and brows, and the direct gaze of a nice boy. "Why," she answered, somewhat surprised, "I don't know. Nothing, I suppose. I haven't thought much about it—not for years."

"There's a teacher," Wynne obliquely answered, "in Rome. She would know for you, if you went to her and sang for her and then asked her. Signora Mazetti. I knew her once, many years ago—she is the only vocal teacher I have ever en-

countered whom I believed to be absolutely honest. If you care for it, I will give you a letter to the little lady. I would like so very much to have a finger in your musical pie."

Laurel dimpled;

"But you take it for granted that I can run over to Rome on a minute's notice, and that isn't possible. But it's nice of you to be interested."

"I'll send you the letter," said Wynne, firmly. "No, I'll write it here and now. And I am sure that you will go—sometime, if not to-morrow. Stonystream is a lovely little place but it is far too small to contain a voice like yours. Just you *want* to go enough. That's all that's really necessary. Look here. . . ."

He sat down upon a convenient stump, drew pad and fountain pen from a capacious pocket, scratched rapidly for a moment or two, folded the note, addressed it and flourished it before Laurel, who stood in front of him, curious and diverted.

"Who knows?" said Wynne, sitting quite still and looking up at her, "this may be the golden key that will unlock the garden door of your future! But it means hard work, Miss Dale."

She made no move to take the paper, but stood regarding him with grave eyes.

"I wonder why you bother?" she said suddenly, "when you *know* you don't like people. . . ."

She broke off, flushing. What a childish, *gauche* thing to say! But Wynne was laughing.

"What has Robin been telling you?"

She was eager to absolve Robin of any tale bearing.

"Nothing not nice. But I've known of you for so long. And you just *wouldn't* know people, you see, and now you go to all this trouble for an absolute stranger. . . ."

"But you are not a stranger. You are Robin's friend—therefore mine, too," said Wynne, amazed as he spoke, to find it was the truth. "Here, don't puzzle your little head any longer over the whys and wherefores of my vagaries! Take your letter, tuck it away, maybe some day you will need it. *Quien sabe?*"

Laurel took the paper from his hand and put it in her sweater pocket.

"I'm very grateful," she said, "and I will keep it always. But I'm afraid that's all I will ever do with it. My cousin has married a great violinist, Etienne de Gabriac—perhaps you have heard of him?—and they are living in Paris. They would like me to go over and study and make my home with them, but I can't," said Laurel.

"Why not? It sounds an excellent opportunity."

She lifted her shoulders in the shadow of a shrug.

"Well—there are so many reasons.—And, frankly, I don't want to go."

"Forgive me," said Wynne gently, "I am an old man and a friend of your friend, and therefore I may allow myself some liberties. So, tell me, little Miss Laurel—is one of your 'reasons'—money?"

As he spoke, he considered whether, on ten minutes acquaintance, he might offer to finance this little person to fame. "All the money, comparatively speaking, in the world," he thought, "and I don't need it—now. And perhaps she does, and if so, she's worth all the backing I could give her. But I suppose it wouldn't do." He sighed, inwardly, because things seemed so ordered in this world that sheer friendly impulses so often do not "do." But Laurel was speaking, rather astonishingly;

"I don't believe so," she replied. "Of course I haven't any money of my own. Or, very little. But if my heart was set on singing, there are several people who would help—Etienne and Mrs. Hood—Robin's mother, you know—and, I suppose, Uncle George—"

"And you wont accept help?" asked Wynne, laughing. "Do you know what I would do in your place?"

His heavy face was lit with amusement and something deeper, and Laurel's own round countenance caught fire and flushed rosy red. "What would you do?" she asked, fascinated.

"I'd greedy-grab everything I could," he answered, "and clutch at every offered penny, and I'd sail away and see all the far corners of the earth and learn the hearts of strange people—as Robin did," he interpolated, cleverly. "And I'd take my voice with me—to Signora Mazetti and I'd learn to sing. Oh, not only for a career, but for myself!

I'd be too grateful to the God who gave me that gift to neglect it and bury it and let it rust out with the corroding years. I'd use it for other people. Money would buy you this, Miss Laurel, and it will buy you new visions, new outlooks, new viewpoints. Travel is stimulating and healing; it is spectacles to eyes grown dim from too much close concentration on the everyday things of life. And one thing more—if there is any one for whom you care more than you care for yourself, you owe it to that person to make the most of yourself. You can never do it—in Stonystream."

Laurel looked at him, her brows a little drawn, her eyes wide and puzzled.

"I never thought of it your way before," she said, "and I'm not sure that it's the right way."

Wynne flung back his head and laughed aloud; "What is the right way, then?" he asked.

She looked at him a moment, still seated on the ancient stump, his great shoulders bent, his hands clasped behind his knees. And she stood quite straight before him, her own hands behind her back, and spoke haltingly out of her heart.

"I'd like to travel," said Laurel, and in her soul she added, "*but not alone.*" "But I don't think it's time yet. Why, I haven't half learned all there is to learn just in this little world about me. Just in—Stonystream. And I don't think I could ever use my voice the way you mean—for money—for strangers—for show! I think," she said, with shining eyes, "that if I could do with it anything

in the world I want to, I'd use it just for children—sick children—and right here—and now."

Wynne held out both hands to her and as she took them, rose to his feet.

Still holding her by their linked fingers, he said:

"Perhaps you are right. Perhaps it is better to travel in the hearts of familiar people rather than in strange lands. And I might have known your voice is the voice for—lullabies."

He dropped her hand and they walked on for a moment in silence, side by side. Presently he touched her lightly on the shoulder, as with bent head, she kept step with him.

"Whatever you do," he said, "I would like to have you count me your friend. I have very few friends. And I know so little of youth. Robin is all I have to keep me in touch with the young. Robin, and now, if you will so far honor me, you. Will you?"

She smiled at this, with misty eyes and a curved, tremulous red mouth;

"I would be so glad," she said simply.

"And don't neglect to think of yourself once and a while," he warned her. "Leave living burials to ancient and battle scarred hermits like myself. The world lies at your feet—a football. So many of us are just footballs for the world. Take your choice. It comes only once, if ever, the opportunity to choose."

Laurel nodded gravely and Wynne, with one of

his characteristic conversational leaps asked abruptly:

"Tell me about Robin."

As he spoke he was aware of something so strange: a warm, friendly glow at his heart, a real interest. He wondered, as he waited for her answer, if he were really cracking the shell of indifference a little; if Robin had worked this miracle for him? He, that so dreaded intrusion into his thoughts and life, now seemed to welcome it. It was true then, after all, that no man could live alone for long. And that every human bond one formed, friendship not the least, brought other bonds, other responsibilities. Or, was it, he wondered, freedom that they brought, freedom from the eternal pre-occupation with self?

He saw then, the shadow in Laurel's eyes and marked her very trivial hesitation, and an odd jealousy stirred within him, instantly replaced by a sensation of impatience toward the boy who had grown so close to his heart, that he could be so blind and so close to the treasures of earth and heaven.

"I don't hear from him, except indirectly," Laurel said. "I saw him once or twice this spring. But you have seen him oftener than I. His mother writes me."

"Let us walk further together," said Wynne, "that is, if you have not something special to do, or are not tired. Tell me, if you care to, of Robin's

mother. She must be a very lovely woman."

"Oh, she is," said Laurel with starry eyes, "the loveliest. She doesn't look much like Robin—you haven't seen her, have you? Except the eyes. She has the blackest hair, and is straight and slender and her face—well, you'd never forget it if you saw it, that's all, all—"

She stopped abruptly, a little confused that her young enthusiasm for the older woman had carried her away and a little sorry that she had been led to discuss her friend, even with this sympathetic listener.

"I see," Wynne said. "But don't stop. Robin has told me something of her, of course. After all, a man's mother is often the answer to the riddle of himself. And I am sure that Mrs. Hood would not be annoyed at your championship, even if I am a stranger. She would be very flattered."

Laurel laughed,

"You couldn't flatter *her*," she said, "and well, I love her. Since the death of my mother, no one has come quite so close to me."

She paused again, astonished by her disloyalty to Aunt Frances; amazed too, by the voicing of a thought which had always remained somewhere hidden within, and then went on;

"I don't know what it is," she said, "charm, perhaps? Or, just a great universal kindness and understanding? She never condemns any one and always seems to be trying to find excuses for people. She is never cold nor hard, and never a judge.

I haven't heard her utter a word of unkind criticism, ever. She just looks for the best in people and always seems to find it. And she loves people. Perhaps that's the answer."

"That's a wonderful trait," said Wynne, slowly, "and I'd like to meet her." He was aware as he spoke, that again he spoke the truth. He wondered a little, if he had been as Robin's mother, if he had not judged nor condemned and had "loved people," if his history would not have been written as something different, something finer. . . .

"Robin is very fortunate," he concluded, "and so, I think, is Robin's mother—"

"Yes," agreed Laurel, swiftly, and eagerly, "as long as she has no one in the world but Robin, isn't it wonderful for her that he should be *Robin* and not some one else?"

She laughed as she finished. "What an absurd sentence!" she said.

"But I understand it," Wynne answered. "—however, you misunderstood me. I was saying—when you interrupted—that she was fortunate—in you!" Inwardly he added, "Oh, Robin, you young, double-distilled idiot!"

On this occasion, Laurel was again late for luncheon. They had walked on and talked on—how they had talked! She found herself telling John Wynne of things that had never before crossed her lips, things unspoken to Aunt Frances, to Elaine, dear and distant, to Mrs. Hood. She marvelled that

so keen a sympathy had sprung up between herself, the young untried girl, and the recluse, old enough to be her father. He had felt it, too; instinctively Laurel knew that. The answer was obvious enough. Robin. But perhaps more than Robin?

Laurel refused to admit the Robin solution, even to herself.

At home, she spoke casually of her meeting, but no more than casually. The hour was hers, secret and illuminating. She might never see him again—although they had not parted with the feeling that it was to be a chance meeting only—but anyway, a secret shared, loses its savour. Somehow she had grown to know Robin better through Wynne, his guide, philosopher and friend. He, Robin, was strangely dearer to her, more surely revealed to her credulous heart.

For a time, she played with the suggestions Wynne had made to her, as a child plays with brightly colored brand new toys. With so much change taking place all about her, she had come, as it were, to a *cul de sac* in her journey, to a passage with no outlet and with a door shut, somewhere, which forbade her to return. She knew, even as she permitted her imagination to take her to Rome, and from Rome to footlights and a stage smothered in flowers and beat upon by the deafening breakers of applause, that she would never beg nor borrow the means to take her away from home. It was not for her, the career, that road of unfaltering struggle. She was too sensitive, her music

was too personal a thing, her ambitions so other than these. She should find a use for her voice, that much was clear to her; but it would not be the use that Wynne had championed. In some alchemic way, her meeting with him had aroused her from the half apathy into which her love for Robin and her subconscious envy of Elaine's happiness had plunged her. An apathy composed somewhat of a resignation to something she had considered inevitable. And there was Aunt Samantha, a straw—in the comparison must needs evoke humour in the midst of the most serious thoughts—at which to clutch. Laurel wanted always to remember Robin and to remember him in Stonystream; but she wanted to do more than just that; she wanted to work at something, to be of some service to the people about her, until mere personal grief would seem infinitely small, and love, a cold star in the night, against the far light of which the fireflies of vain dreams glowed, in brief and beautiful futility.

CHAPTER XVII

SETTLING DOWN

*Summer's em'rald blood is hot
In the veined leaf,
Roses flaunt above my door,
Look, Companion Grief!
Are these not enchanted days?
Is the sky not blue?
Must you walk my path with me
All the summer through?*

During June, great changes took place in Adams House. Uncle George and Aunt Frances, appearing to be unable to bear even a Stonystream summer without Elaine, closed the house and went away, on the honeymoon they had not been able to have a quarter of a century ago. Uncle George rejoiced in Canadian cousins; Aunt Frances boasted relatives in the far West and so they planned to take two months "off" and travel. In August, they would return, pack such belongings as they wished, and, after finding a dwelling place in town, would move. Laurel, naturally, had a good deal of difficulty in explaining to them why she was not willing to accompany them on their vacation, and more when she finally told them that in no circum-

stances would she pull up roots and move to town with them in September. Uncle George was bewildered but articulate, Aunt Frances tearful and incoherent and both were really hurt. Aunt Samantha was called into counsel and, putting forth excellent reasons of sound common sense, urged that she be allowed to "borrow" Laurel for an indefinite length of time. In a measure, once they became accustomed to the idea, the Adamses were not wholly reluctant. For the two of them they would require only a very small apartment in the high-priced city, three would mean another room, might even mean a maid, as Uncle George had been threatening. And for three only, Adams house was too large a proposition to keep running. It was different when Elaine was home and had all her friends in and out "all hours of the day and night," as her mother said, in sorrowful reminiscence. Anyway, it would not be as if Laurel were far removed from them. They could see her often, should be certain to have a bed-davenport in the new living room for her when she came to visit them in town. But without her permanent place in their newly ordered lives, they would be more free; free to go to Elaine when Uncle George's business responsibilities permitted; free to travel, to do much as they pleased. It may have been that, for all their deep longing for their child and the honest affection they bore Laurel, that they were not sorry, these two middle aged children, to be truly alone for a time, to travel alone and to

play at doll's housekeeping once again, in the dear, bridal fashion of youth. At all events, every one concerned pretended to themselves and out loud, that the arrangements were only temporary and "subject to change without notice" and felt a little better for the make-believe.

About the middle of the month the Adamses departed, with quite a large and representative delegation to see them off at Stonystream depot, and with Laurel to start them on their journey from New York. She spent that night with Mrs. Hood, and, as Robin was, as usual, not at home, they talked long and late over cups of chocolate and the foolish sweet biscuits that most women never outgrow; both comfortably stretched out in adjacent arm chairs and robed in loose negligees. "It compensates one for being a woman," Laurel said, as the last biscuit disappeared, "to be able to get as comfortable as this. It's something men miss. Surely pipes and smoking jackets and siphons aren't the same!"

She discussed the changes and the coming summer and Mrs. Hood approved, checking an invitation to Laurel to spend the coming month with her at the very tip of her tongue. She would have loved to have had Laurel near her, but she approved the other plans. And she was a very wise woman.

After a time, Mrs. Hood rose and took from a leather portfolio excellent photographs of the Taj Mahal, beautifully expressed in terms of black and white.

"This is Robin's favorite picture," she said smiling, "I was about to send it to you when you sent me word you were coming to town. I had one framed for him just like this and planned to give you this one if you would care for it."

Laurel took the picture in her hands and looked long at the marble bubble, builded by man and raised to the memory of a woman much beloved. Unconsciously, her voice softened and dropped, as she said,

"How very wonderful! And you have seen it?"

Mrs. Hood nodded.

"On my wedding trip," she said. "We were six months in Egypt, Africa, India, England. . . . Later, of course, when Robin was old enough to care for beauty, I took him there. It was, in a way, a pilgrimage for me."

She leaned over, out of the great chair, and touched the photograph with swift, caressing fingers,

"It is most lovely," she said, "not just as a marvellous building, but as the material expression of a spiritual beauty. And one man caused it to be made visible in perfect marble that other men might share his vision, and another man of another race and generation has hung a lamp within it, a lamp which burns eternally to the memory of yet another woman. To me it is strong and touching and exquisite. Some day, you must see the Taj Mahal, Laurel."

Laurel, her hands folded over the picture, looked up.

"I think," she said, hesitating a little, "that every man who really loves a woman, builds, at her loss, just such a shrine to her, in his heart of hearts. Surely, all men must create a memorial as beautiful, from the delicate material of their dreams and memories, to the women they most have loved—mother or daughter or wife."

Mrs. Hood's dark eyes shone, briefly, with tears.

"I wonder!" she said softly, "perhaps you are right. I hope you are right, but believe you are right, Laurel, no matter what happens, for it is a beautiful belief. Most of us are only too ready to think that men forget, that their dream memorials fall to a little dust and scatter on the destroying winds of time."

But Laurel was unconvinced.

"Not all of them," she denied stoutly, and, half to herself, she added, "not Robin."

"Oh, Robin!" Mrs. Hood's dark eyes were crinkled with affectionate laughter. "Robin is very young, he has his work, he will forget as surely as the sun will rise to-morrow! Any shrine that he may have built, was erected while Elaine was still alive to him. I think he built it long before he met her and fitted her to it afterwards. And Elaine herself destroyed it. It was a makeshift temple at the best, not fashioned from enduring materials. Robin will forget," said Robin's mother, confidently, "and he will love again."

Laurel was silent, unseeing eyes bent on the picture of the Taj Mahal.

When she returned to Stonystream, she went through the silent house as a ghost walks, half fearfully, touching each familiar, often ugly object with tender hands, dreaming there alone for a time in the half-gloom of drawn blinds. It was late afternoon and the sun wove the cool fire of long, golden shadows across the grass, and Laurel, escaping from Adams House, took pen and paper to the old swing and sat there for a time, rocking and writing, at random.

"And if I confess to you, Robin, that I have stayed here and shall stay here just in the hope of seeing you now and then—what will you think? I know that for the real reason now, although I have tried to delude myself with so many others. All this talk about wanting to forget—well, it's just *talk*, that's all! But, oh, I do want to forget—the bitter. And remember the rest. When you come back to Winding River to John Wynne I shall be here. Not so far away. Dearest, I love you."

She twisted her note into a cocked hat and ran to the apple tree. From the secret place she drew out the bundle of letters, untied the strong string from about the rubber-cloth covering and added her last note. Then, back to Adams House, to lock up and take a last look, and finally, off to Aunt Samantha's.

The Holsapple house was delightfully hideous with the unlovely beauty one finds in bull dogs. It

was not like Adams House, ugly in spots, with mere outcroppings of the Pullman car period of art. It was ugly throughout, with the hair-cloth and hair wreaths of a bygone generation, with wax fruit, marvellous under bell-shaped glass cases, in the stiff, dark, best parlors, which smelt of closed doors; and it was alarming with its great, massive beds in all the bedrooms, their carved headboards reaching to the ceiling. But Laurel loved it all, the house was so magnificently consistent, from the Mansard roof to the cupolas, from the cellar stocked with dandelion wine to the blue roses on the wash bowls. Here and there a bit of beauty shone like a silver coin in a junk heap. Beauty consistent, too, with the several generations that the house represented. There were hooked rugs, like curious gardens, charmingly faded and wonderfully fashioned. On the walls there were prim, pathetic samplers worked by little impatient fingers, long since dust; there were patchwork quilts and applique bed-spreads with small, painfully neat stitches imprisoning each variegated patch or flower; in the kitchen there was thin old silver, a row of pewter, shining copper utensils and curious implements of brass. And in a china closet, a set of Crown Derby, which would make the mouth of any collector water with envy and delight.

Wall papers and carpets, were, of course, execrable, and the furniture was dark and heavy, as substantial as Aunt Samantha could need it. But now and then one came on a really fine piece, a

gate-leg table, a Windsor chair, a grandfather's clock with lovely, mellow chimes, and the sun and moon moving across it in stately pride.

Aunt Samantha's own "study," on the first floor, was a cheerful place done in faded red, with footstools and ancient couches and chairs covered in once scarlet satin, buttoned on in black. And there was a deep bay window, crowded with growing plants.

Here Laurel found her hostess before a huge, high secretary, pierced with pigeon-holes.

"Don't get up," said the guest hastily, "sit still like a good girl and let me kiss you!"

Mrs. Holsapple, struggling to rise and much handicapped by a half opened drawer, subsided greatfully, heaving in diverse places.

"I expected you sooner," she reproached. "Supper's just about dished up. Where's your bags and things?"

"A boy will bring them up, D. V.," said Laurel, sinking into a deep sway-back rocker. "I control the keys of Adams House and thought perhaps I might pack a small trunk to-morrow and move it up—or have some one move it for me," she added laughing, "—there's lots of time."

Mrs. Holsapple rubbed a hand thoughtfully over her first small imbedded chin and succeeded in decorating it with a large blue ink blot. Affectionately surveying Laurel, she said,

"Bright and early to-morrow we'll drive down and look at the store. No harm in starting in pretty

soon. We could open next month if we hustled and I've no doubt the visitors up to the Inn will be glad of a change from their chef now and then. I've got a cook, a colored girl I discovered while I was upstate. She'll be here next week. The folks that had the store lived in the back of it and it's all fixed with a good gas range. I'll get in a couple of nice girls around here to do the waiting and you can keep an eye on things in general. I want you to help me fix the place up. It looks sorter shabby and needs a lot of trim and painting—and I know you have ideas. . . ."

Laurel began to enjoy the prospect of renovating the little Main Street store. Her mind saw immediate possibilities and she was deep in a discussion of these, or rather a recital, for Aunt Samantha merely sat, vastly content and admired her, when a gong sounded somewhere and they went in to supper.

Mrs. Holsapple kept one "girl." Her name was Maggie and she would never see sixty again. She was a cantankerous creature with very little flesh on her rheumatic bones, and hair, of the salt and pepper variety, done up in an unalluring bun at the top of her narrow head. She was an old friend of Laurel's, and kept the supper table lively with question and comment while serving a meal fit for the high gods, her angular elbows punctuating all the pauses. Short, crusty biscuit, strawberries in deep blue bowls, with pitchers of thick, yellow cream, chipped beef "gravy," tea for whomever wished it,

doughnuts, preserves, coffee, and little crackly potato croquets. Laurel ate and ate and regretfully mused on the weight she had lost during the winter. Prophetically she seemed to see it advancing once more ruthlessly upon her and almost choked over her fourth biscuit at the thought that before the summer was over she might easily become a second Aunt Samantha.

She went to bed early that night, in feathers, and in the morning, after a sound and undisturbed slumber, drove with Mrs. Holsapple in a dilapidated surrey to view the store.

The next few weeks she described in letters to Aunt Frances as "happy but hectic." Laurel had full charge of painters and carpenters and when, late in July, the work was finished, it did her, according to her employer, more than usual credit. She had had the walls painted pale cream, and the wood work a soft French blue. The carpenter-built tables were cream, stencilled in blue, as were the straight backed chairs; and there were plants growing indoors and gay window boxes outside. The exterior was white, with blue blinds and a trim sign hung out on a painted, iron arm, done in Old English letters and reading "*The House of the Blue Moon.*"

"And what does that mean?" asked Aunt Samantha the first time she viewed this crowning touch.

"Nothing," said Laurel, in overalls, gazing serenely at her handiwork. "They never do. If we

called it just 'Lunch and Tea' or even 'Tea and Toast,' we would never get the city people over the door sill. They like foolishment. And anyway it is only once in a blue moon that you find a good tea room! Every one knows that!"

Another modest legend informed the hungry passerby that lunch and tea could be had within at moderate rates and of strictly home cooking. And from the day the tea room opened, business boomed.

Laurel put her waitresses into blue and white check gingham, surplices, with little ruffled aprons and caps of crisp, white organdy. In cool white, she presided over all proceedings but at the end of a week, Aunt Samantha ordered her, brusquely, to oversee more and overwork less, and installed a "real" cashier, stolen from a Stonystream shop, in behind the little window. So eventually, Laurel found that her duties consisted of dropping in for an hour in the morning and again in the afternoon. The rest of the time was her undisputed own.

Robin she saw several times. Once as he was strolling with John Wynne, she had accidentally met them and walked with them for a little while, and two or three times when he dropped into the tea-room alone to offer her all sorts of idiotic advice and tease her about her overalls. But he was here, there, and everywhere, and although he announced that after his play was finally produced, he would come to Wynne's for a long rest and to play with

Laurel, she was far from confident that he would keep to this alluring plan.

Wynne she had seen once more alone. On this occasion she took Poilu to him, just before the Adamses left. Mrs. Holsapple was very wary of Poilu and kept, beside, an obese, ancient and beloved cat named William. As Adams House was to be closed and Poilu could not go with Laurel, the natural host for the dog appeared to be Mr. Wynne and Laurel tramped happily to Winding River with Poilu at her heels, after warning Wynne by a little note. They had tea on this event and she filled the great stone fireplace with green boughs to remind him, she said, "that it was summer out of doors and he must not stick mustily in the house." Their friendship was an established thing now, seeming not to need many encounters to feed it. Often he wrote to her, charming little letters, and sent her odd, small gifts, a bit of Chinese jade, as green as May and as cool as snow, a rare book, a photograph. And she brought something to him that even Robin could not give him. Youth that was feminine, the womanly point of view, the little girl tricks that aroused within him the instinct of protection, a yearning for lost dreams and wise, tender laughter.

Robin, hearing of the alliance from both sides, raised his eyebrows. It was hard to imagine, he thought, that little Laurel should charm a man of Wynne's type. He said as much, to Wynne, and was answered, somewhat sharply ;

"Like most boys, you spend your time over-valuing and under-rating. Your little Laurel is a very sweet, sane character. I could not imagine a more perfect comrade, a more ideal daughter. I wish to Heaven she were mine."

With so busy a summer to occupy her, with her occasional glimpses of Robin and her growing intimacy with Wynne and Aunt Samantha, Laurel was not lonely for companionship. Jerry, an old standby and pleasant playmate, was summering in the Berkshires where the Flapper and her mother had taken a cottage; or, if not spending his entire vacation with them, he was at least employing the lion's share of it in that manner, filling in gaps with flying visits to classmates and excusing his absence to his parents by letters referring deeply to the "broadening effect of travel," and "contact with men of affairs." He wrote now and then to Laurel and she also heard frequently from Jane, whose letters, every other word underlined and written in an amazing, black hand, were a delight. The most significant event to Laurel was that the Flapper, renouncing Flapperdom, had started to let her hair grow. Jerry was also eloquent on the subject;

"It's a half an inch longer," he wrote, "redder than ever and not quite as curly. She looks a little shaggy. . . ."

Laurel laughed over the letters and the snapshots that sometimes accompanied them and went often to the hardware shop to console and conciliate Mr.

Jones and more often to the Jones mansion to commiserate with Jerry's mother. But she found that this lady had hardly needed comforting when she could clip out, and lay away, in the family Bible, the printed news that "Mr. Jerry Jones of Stony-stream was visiting," etc., etc.

Later in August, Robin's play, urged ahead a little, was put on. Laurel made the trip to town and sat in a box with Mrs. Hood. She heard very little of the play despite her interest. Her eyes swept the house for a glimpse of Robin, but he was furtively dodging people, somewhere near the lobby and appeared to take his curtain call very white and nervous. He was not with his mother and her guest afterwards, although he came and spoke abstractedly to them both and then departed to have supper with one or two friends, his manager and some of the cast. Laurel stopped with Mrs. Hood and they slept very little upon that momentous night, feverishly waiting for the damp, black verdict of the earliest morning papers. The reviews, when they finally arrived, after what seemed interminable hours, were, in the main, excellent. And not one neglected to speak encouragingly of the "great promise" shown by the new playwright. Among the critics none was fulsomely enthusiastic, none underestimated, and so Robin was content. Not so Mrs. Hood and Laurel, who found all the criticisms sadly wanting, and the gentlemen who had perpetrated them lacking in adult intelligence. A wire came from Wynne the night of the perform-

ance and, some time after, Robin learned that his friend had, after all, made the trip he detested to the town he loathed, slipped into a last row seat and slipped out of the theatre again unacclaimed and unrecognized, just as the curtain fell on the last act.

“Encouraging symptoms, anyway,” Robin said, “next time I’ll have him in a stage box!”

Later than they had planned, the Adamses returned home and Laurel moved back once more to Adams House to help Aunt Frances with the packing and also to escort her to town, apartment hunting. Aunt Samantha took the desertion of her lieutenant philosophically enough for she was secure in the knowledge that Laurel would come back to her and “for good.” Meanwhile, the House of the Blue Moon ran on oiled wheels and made much money. Such waffles, such cream gravy, such fried chicken! Such Johnny cake and Lady Baltimore and other southern contributions mingled with sublimated New England fare, had never before been seen or tasted in Stonystream, where even the fashionable Inn was not crowned with bay leaves for super cooking. The Inn, forced to admit that its guests partook too heartily of Blue Moon tea to enjoy Inn dinner, was concerned, but helpless; passing motorists called Aunt Samantha blessed, and Stonystream proper patronized the new project with good will. Men, whose wives made summer flitting, walked about town after luncheon, with glorified expressions and loosened belts, and

Aunt Samantha found it would pay her to keep open for six-to-eight dinner.

Thus the summer drew to a close and the Adamses went forth to adventure in the asphalt wilderness of New York, to set up their household gods in a cliff dwelling on Riverside Drive where the grey battleships rode at anchor on the river. Robin, with a portable typewriter, came to Winding River to work and rest under John Wynne's guidance and to tramp the roads and hills with an insanely happy police dog at his heels. Laurel, a little depressed by all the changes but unconquerably optimistic, moved bag and baggage to the house on the hill, to settle down for an indefinite period with Aunt Samantha. And Adams House, locked and shuttered, stood lonely and empty, presenting a reproachful front to the indifferent passersby. But it was not entirely deserted. Laurel pilgrimaged there, almost every day, and the garden, blooming with autumn asters and cosmos, was not suffered to be neglected. And the post office box in the apple tree knew the flattery of occasional contributions.

CHAPTER XVIII

JANE ARRIVES

*She is much younger than the youngest Spring,
But very wise;
With laughter's wisdom shining clear and gay,
From her young eyes.*

Aunt Samantha rested from her labors of putting up berries on the back porch and Laurel rested with her. The land lay very hot and still, waving green and golden, across the little hills and in the deep fertile valleys. The still air of September brooded over the country and the misty outlines of distant blue hills melted tenderly into the sky. It was a day like Spring in its effect upon the eye of horizon and heaven; it did not have the clear cut contours of early Summer or the sharper outlines of Autumn. Laurel drew a deep breath. She had been reading aloud to Aunt Samantha, first a letter from Elaine,—a happy letter, but limited in expression, a letter almost entirely devoted to a description of Etienne's English tour and her own friendship for Etienne's sister; then a letter from Aunt Fanny, play-going in town, and lastly a letter from Jane. Over Jane's letter Aunt Samantha was moved to a deep internal rumble of laughter.

"Seems like I saw that child roaming the roads in that heathenish car of hers last year"; she meditated. "Red hair and all—with that reckless Jones boy at her heels. Good thing for him when he goes back to college. But I'd like to see your Flipper."

"Flapper," corrected Laurel, absently;

"They flip more than they flap," said Aunt Samantha, astutely, "Fli-p-Flapper, then."

Laurel re-read the note. Jane was still in the Berkshires and wrote despondently;

"Dearest Laurel;

"Life's so complicated just at present. Here Mother has an invitation to go out to Hawaii this coming fall and won't take me. The doctor says I'm outgrowing my strength—whatever that means—and says he wants me in a regular climate—none of this tropic Wiki-waki stuff—out of doors if possible. No more school. Just early to bed and early to rise and you'll miss a lot of fun. You know. Holy—and everything. Anyway, its hard lines on the Mommer, she wants awfully to go to the South Seas or some such place and it looks as tho she'd have to take a house in the country for the Fall and Winter and vegetate along with her red headed offspring. Everything's all mixed up and even Jerry hasn't any advice to offer. He's here now you know and glooms because college is after opening too soon for him. Drop me a line and let me hear if you have any suggestions. After Jerry goes I'll be as lonesome as a gold fish with scarlet fever. I've grown three inches this summer and look like a model for macaroni portraits.

Tell me all about your tea shop and if you need an errand boy write to your loving

“JANE.”

Laurel dropped the letter in her lap. “I wish,” she mused, “that Jane’s mother would give her to me for the winter. I’d love to have her.”

“Well, there’s room here,” said Aunt Samantha practically, “and the more young ones I have around me the better I feel. Write the Flipper and tell her to come along.”

“Oh, but that would be an imposition,” cried Laurel. “Still—it would be fun,” she added. “Jane’s a circus, all by herself; three rings, the band and even the pink lemonade and the side shows!”

“Shucks! She can pay board if she feels that way—and help in the store in the bargain. Write her to-day and see what she says.”

When Laurel’s letter was written, she came in search of Aunt Samantha and found her out by the chicken coop talking to Robin who leaned lazily on the wire fencing, hat off and still in the disreputable flannels he affected, unabashedly making love to The Widow.

“Boy’s come over to see you,” said Aunt Samantha as Laurel approached, “but he finds me more to his liking. He’s been telling me that the best eating chicken in the world is a cross between an Indian game cock and a white Wyandotte. Where he gets his information, Lord alone knows. I’ve

offered him a job as chicken man anyway. It's healthier than play writing."

"And I've accepted," said Robin promptly, "just to be near you, Aunt Samantha."

He glanced wickedly toward Laurel and Aunt Samantha tossed her chins disdainfully.

"You might do worse," she said, and then, leading the way toward the house, "come in, you two and taste some of my dandelion wine. It's time for tea at the Blue Moon but we'll let you off for once."

So Robin found himself as many times before during the last month "tasting" the smooth fragrant wine from little delicate glasses and more than tasting some of Maggie's cookies. Maggie, by the way, floating around the kitchen meanwhile, with one ear cocked toward the door and singing, through her nose, very flat and shrill, a favorite and gloomy hymn, beginning, "*When in the fiery lake we sinners—*"

Laurel, cool and crisp in blue organdy, flew upstairs to get her letter to Jane, leaving Robin alone for a moment with Mrs. Holsapple, a hostess he thoroughly enjoyed;

"Laurel's looking better," announced that lady, leaning back in her chair and fanning herself with a palm leaf.

"Very much," Robin agreed, "I never saw her look so pretty."

"There's others that see it," said Aunt Samantha, knowingly.

"Indeed?" Robin looked up from the cigarette he had been permitted to light and his eyes sought those of his hostess inquiringly through the half light of the darkened room.

But Aunt Samantha would say no more.

When Laurel came into the room again, like a shaft of light in a forest, Robin watched her with quickened appreciation. She was pretty. Slimmer, somehow, but with her little face still round and becomingly rosy and her soft curly hair caught with a black velvet ribbon and another around her waist.

He thought to himself that he had never really "looked" at Laurel. When he had first met her, she was as a pale star beside the sunshine of Elaine; later, he had just been used to her; she and his mother were merely less distasteful to him for a wretched period than other women. And, as after ten minutes desultory conversation, he went toward the village with the letter to Jane in his pocket, he tried to see her as through another man's eyes and found a vast difference in the vision. He recalled what John Wynne had said of her, what his mother had said; and he wondered that he had been so blind to her beauty, a beauty not of features, but of soul, which glowed through her and informed her lightest word with loveliness and made exquisite her slight, sunshiny smile.

Laurel's letter to Jane brought forth much correspondence and finally Mrs. Van Wyck's consent to leave Jane with Laurel in October and to allow

her to stay at Stonystream through the winter;

"As a matter of fact," Jane wrote, impishly, "I think The Mother is relieved. The people she is going to go to Hawaii with are so very—*adult*—you know. And there's a man going along she doesn't quite like to have me around with—but he plays good bridge. Anyway, there'll be a flock of cocktails on that trip and all that sort of thing—and she would rather plain Jane stayed away from tropic starlight. I'll meet you in town on the first, and I'll bring Convention with me if Aunt Samantha doesn't mind and if you'll tell Robin Hood to keep his old Poilu away from her. I ask you what chance has Convention with a French private from the trenches? Echo answers, none whatever. I am dying to see you and hear all about Elaine and everything. Also, to make myself very solid with the Jones family lest they believe that my influence on young Jerry is not one of the best."

Toward the end of the month Laurel went to town and spent a few days with Aunt Fanny and Uncle George. She found them in a state of ferment owing to the arrival of the French mails and with them a letter from Elaine announcing that in the early summer she would return to America in order that her baby might be "born at home."

This was happy hearing for Laurel! But her heart ached with envy. Lucky Elaine! Happy Etienne! She planned immediately to sew on small clothes and laughed through tears to see that Aunt Fanny had already had the same thought and put

it into action. In the Riverside Drive apartment a number of sewing baskets lay about, all overflowing with sheer-white material.

The apartment was very attractive, Laurel thought. There was enough of Adams House in it to make it homey. And Laurel liked her few nights spent on the davenport bed and her visits to Anne Hood, back from a visit in Bar Harbor, her modest shopping trips and her three plays. But she was quite ready to meet Jane and take her back to Stonystream when the time came.

Jane was still Jane. She was taller, slenderer, rather willowy and inclined to stoop, but her piquant little face was unchanged. Her hair to be sure was now long enough to pin into a scant knob at the back of her neck and she assured Laurel when they met, that "being nineteen was a horrible proposition."

"Neither one thing nor the other," she confided as they sat in the train together after having said farewell to Mrs. Van Wyck, "in betwixt and between, not a child and not quite grown, although God knows I hope I *stop* growing soon—I'm up to Jerry's chin!"

"You measured?" asked Laurel, with interest.

Jane stubbed her toe against the wicker basket wherein Convention reposed, sleeping, as was evidenced by the howl which followed the stub, with one eye open. "So like Convention!" said Jane commenting on this.

"Measured? Certainly. Often. Don't try and

tease me about Jerry, Laurel. It won't work. Every one else has tried it before this. I have been teased by experts, so spare your breath. I love Jerry, I adore him, he has two more years of college; in ten he'll be able to make a living—and then we shall see. Now talk about Aunt Samantha."

"You wait and see her for yourself, little wretch," said Laurel, "You'll love and adore her too. See if you don't."

She was entirely correct in her diagnosis. Jane fell upon the house with a shriek, hurled Convention to the middle of the floor, announced that she "could eat it up because it's so deliciously absurd," and on being presented to the owner, grasped that lady's fat large hand with unusual vigor and said:

"I love you, I love your house. I'm never going away. I think you're a duck to take me in and when do I start cooking for The Blue Moon? Aunt Samantha, meet Convention."

This all in one breath. Aunt Samantha confided later to Laurel, when Jane, with screams of delight, was exploring her new bed-room, that with a girl like that around they might shortly expect a visit from the local Prohibition agents. "She certainly goes to one's head," said Mrs. Holsapple. "And goes to her own as well. If that kind of a nature ain't Home Brew, my name's never Samantha Holsapple!"

Robin was bidden to supper and the four of them played hearts afterwards to the joy of Jane who thrice succeeded in handing the Queen of Spades

to Aunt Samantha and then sat back to enjoy the flow of conversation which followed that seditious act.

Before he left, Robin said:

"Laurel, I have persuaded Mr. Wynne that what he really needs around him is a whole herd of girls. You and Jane constitute that herd. And we would love to include Aunt Samantha if she will come. We propose a picnic lunch in the Hermit's Hut some day next week—how about it?"

Jane was delighted, Laurel quietly happy at the prospect and Aunt Samantha regretful that her various duties would not permit her to go off gadding. But the party was arranged for the following Monday before Robin left.

Sunday night Aunt Samantha demanded an interview with Laurel.

"No you don't," she said to Jane who peered around the open door in green pyjamas, with her hair almost "down to her shoulders," curiosity written large upon her from her bare, pink toes to her bare, red head. "This is serious. Not for children. Run away, miss."

Jane made a face and disappeared and Laurel drew a hassock up by the high old bed where Aunt Samantha, buttoned up to the lowest chin in white cambric with a frilled collar and long sleeves, and with a nightcap on her dark hair, lay in state.

"Just a word. When Robin was here, sometime ago, I told him you had a beau. Don't disillusion him—and make me out a liar into the bargain."

"Why," said Laurel, going red, "I never heard of such a thing. What did you tell him?"

"Well, not in so many words. Just a hint, and no untruth in it," she added, severely. "I guess he took my meaning though. Perhaps more than he was meant to. Or, if not *meant*, then perhaps more than was in the words themselves."

"Well," said Laurel, again her sense of humour coming to her rescue. "Anyway, I *have* one!"

"What!" Aunt Samantha threatened to rise from the bed and her cap slipping rakishly askew, displayed the wire curlers adorning her forehead. "What! And never told me?"

"I met him in town," said Laurel, affecting embarrassment. "And a very nice boy he is. Dick Dangerfield, a southerner. He has business with Uncle George and dined and went to the play with us. He hopes to get out here to see me and I've had two letters," she concluded in triumph.

Aghast, Aunt Samantha fell back among her piled up pillows.

"Looks like I had just *wished* him on you!" she said in amazement.

"Don't worry, I was only playing. I *did* meet him, he *did* write, he *is* coming to call. But I'm—not interested. No one is going to steal me from you, you dear auntie," said Laurel.

"No one?" questioned Aunt Samantha.

Laurel was silent and Mrs. Holsapple added,

"I'm selfish about you, Laurel. You bring so much sunshine into this dark house. And I

wouldn't ever want to lose you. There's that little thing Jane, too. I declare, if she stays here all the winter I'll never in all this world be able to give her back to her mother! Seems like young things just take such a holt on me that I want about a dozen of them around. But Laurel, don't make the mistake of not marrying and just shooing every man off because maybe he isn't quite up to your ideal of what a man should be. I married and I was happy. But Zeneas died and I've been alone ever since. If I had had children— Well—," she said, sighing, "I didn't and that's an end on't. But you're a home body, Laurel, and I want to see you settled sometime with the man you love."

The brown head bent lower and Aunt Samantha reached out to touch the idle hand lying palm up on the counterpane.

"I know, child," she said, "it's very hard. But don't fret, everything will come right. And I've watched you dreaming to yourself when you thought no one would see. Dreams are very fine," said Aunt Samantha, "but they're not a patch on real life. Things are more wonderful than we think them—real things. Dream less, live more—and when you want a thing, Laurel, *go out and get it*. Dreaming won't bring it to you. Now go to bed, child, and get a good night's rest."

CHAPTER XIX

ENTER MR. DANGERFIELD

*Who stoops to second best serves alien gods,
His altar fires smoulder under weight
Of ashen memory. And all his jewels
May not outshine their flaw. And all his prayers
Prevail no whit against the reckoning.
Love brooks no insult; from that higher throne
The naked heart is flayed with whip and scourge
And knows, poor renegade, what he has lost,
And what, denied.*

The picnic on Monday was an unqualified success. Aunt Samantha, who scorned such viands as men consider food, when left to make their own blundering preparations, insisted on sending a hamper. It was a large hamper and her guests thanked their stars that they once more could count on the blue roadster for transportation, for Jane had been to town to bid her mother farewell and had returned in triumph, as the goddess from the machine.

Before they reached Winding River curiosity overcame them and they peered into the basket. There were little salad sandwiches, each in a kimona of oiled paper, a whole cold chicken, an eight layer

chocolate cake which was Aunt Samantha's speciality and which she had taught the Blue Moon cook to make with splendid financial result; there were bottles of iced tea and coffee and one smaller bottle, conspicuously labelled, "for Robin and Mr. Wynne," which contained dandelion wine. Reviewing these delicacies, Jane wondered if she would be able to drive home. She also deplored the fact that she had had to leave Convention with Aunt Samantha and the cat—for what she called, "Poiluish reasons." And added that it sounded "rather like a new Balkan state, or, if not Balkan, then something similar."

Of course, as every one expected, things befell just as Robin and Laurel had prophesied among themselves. There was love at first sight between John Wynne and Jane. Shortly after they had been welcomed at the shack, Robin suggested to Jane that it would be well to watch her step; "You're apt to be immortalized in a play, Flapper," he warned, "so best foot forward is to be recommended."

Wynne laughed, and Jane, with a devotional light in the green eyes, murmured softly, but not too softly;

"Once into every young girl's life there comes an opportunity to be the inspiration of some older man. . . ."

She was so serious when she said it, that for a moment even Laurel was misled and looked at her charge with comic despair, and Wynne, sitting on

the great couch, shifted a bit uneasily and looked up at the slender creature, perched on the nearest arm of it, in some perturbation. Jane's expression, as she held the group for a moment, including Robin, standing amused and negligent by the fireplace, was unworldly to a degree and worthy the efforts of a photographer. After a moment of speaking silence, she added, solemnly;

"Leave it to me, friends. I took a course in inspiration!"

And, "Darned if she didn't!" remarked Robin, some minutes later to Laurel as they both watched Mr. Wynne tolerantly permit his youngest guest to toy with his sacred typewriter and flick over the pages of cherished first editions. 'She's a wonder!'

"She wants me to get married," said Laurel, absently, her eyes on Jane's straight back, "so that she will have the proper sort of chaperone. Her definition is rather marvellous. 'Not so giddy that you have to keep an eye on her; not too pretty, so she won't attract more than six of the bachelors; and strict enough to give me an excuse to stick to her when I don't like the man who wants to take me walking in the moonlight!'"

Robin shouted with laughter, but sobered almost at once;

"I've been hearing things about you," he said darkly, and led the way to the furthest corner of the room, where he installed her in a chair and dropped to a cushion at her feet and upturned a sober face to hers.

"What, for instance?"

"That you are much be-trailed and sought after."

He honestly believed that he had heard this, did Robin, so remarkable are the powers of imagination, aided by suggestion.

"In Stonystream?" asked Laurel, demurely and with the lifted brow and wide eyes of innocence incarnate.

She wondered a little at herself. She seemed so suddenly unlaurelish. But she recalled what Aunt Samantha had said. . . .

"Why not?" asked Robin, scorning the implication.

But Laurel was out of her chair and across the room, almost in one lovely movement.

"Here, you two," she said with a hand on Jane's pliant shoulder, "we're hungry! I know this is your party, Mr. Wynne, but I insist upon being hostess. Let's look in the Holsapple basket. Robin just told me he was starved!"

Robin opened his mouth and his eyes, shut them both for a moment and allowed the mendacity to pass.

They ate, the four of them, on a sturdy kitchen table which Pedro had laid out of doors and fished ants from the drinkables and all manner of twigs, with and without active legs, from the edibles Pedro had concocted and Aunt Samantha reinforced. After luncheon was over, Robin brought out rugs and cushions and made the girls comfortable, and then, the two men smoking in perfect peace, lazily

outstretched, they listened to Jane disparage her summer,

"I give you my word," she offered generously, "the men aren't what they used to be. Not nowadays. Hip pocket editions, every last one of them. Utterly absurd creatures, model summer visitors . . . and a model is an imitation of the real thing, as everybody knows. It was a pity when the hotel closed. They hated to go back to boarding school!"

The October sun was very warm, it was a day such as comes in midsummer, perhaps the last of such days. Laurel, listening to Jane's voice run on, punctuated by lazy laughter from the audience, felt herself grow drowsy—drowsier—presently, without volition, she slid quietly down among her cushions and slept. Robin, turning, just in time to see her eyes close, put a rug over her and motioned to the others for comparative silence. Jane, breaking off in the middle of a sentence, smiled and nodded and Robin saw, with some surprise, that the elfin eyes were cloudy with some very sincere emotion.

"Isn't she a dear?" said Jane softly. "Look at her, will you? Sleeping like a baby! Sometimes I think Laurel must be tired all the time—just thinking of things to do for other people."

She scrambled to her feet and imperiously demanded that "Mr. John" show her around the length and breadth of his domain. Hand in hand, they tiptoed off together and Robin was left alone,

guarding Laurel's sleep. He watched her for a long time, the minutes drifting past unheeded, the sun all a dappled, gold glory, in the reddened leaves. In Laurel's face the colour came and went with her even, light breathing, the short, thick lashes lay weighted with slumber on the round curve of her cheek, and one hand was childishly curled up under her neck. As he considered her, a sudden impulse flooded Robin to shield her from something—he wasn't quite sure from what— She seemed so defenceless, lying there; there was something so perfectly young about her, so touching; in that moment she seemed younger than Jane, whose voice he heard drifting back to him from the shadowy woods.

When Laurel unclosed her eyes, it was to find Robin still beside her. If his own vision had been a little clearer, he might have known how to interpret her first waking look, a happy look, not astonished, but satisfied as though her eyes rested on a dear and familiar possession. When he spoke, laughing, she flushed and the grey eyes were momentarily veiled.

"What a guest you must think me!" she apologized, sitting up and raking her soft hair with hurried fingers, for unbidden bits of bark and leaves. "But I did have such a good nap. I must be getting old. Will you come with me and find the others?"

He helped her to her feet. She was a little cramped, and stumbled when she stood up and

Robin put an arm around her to steady her. He was amazed and a little hurt "in his friendship," he told himself later, to feel her stiffen in his light clasp and draw herself away. A prey to confused emotions he spoke of commonplace things, as they walked through the woods together and tracked the whereabouts of their absent companions by the sound of Wynne's laughter in the distance. Laurel, rosy from sleep, was rather silent, he thought; until they came up with the runaways and then he altered his opinion. He had never seen her gayer or more talkative.

Later, when the sun slid imperceptibly a degree further west, and a cool wind blew up with warning on its wings, they went back to the shack and lighted the fire. There, Laurel was persuaded to sing to them, without accompaniment, but very sweetly, a pleasure that was interrupted by the melancholy howls of Poilu, who was temperamentally incapable of hearing music without wishing to join in. This effectually broke up the concert and Laurel was soon in serious talk with Wynne, while Robin had a word, aside, with Jane.

"Who is this new man of Laurel's?" he asked abruptly, poking at the fire with a careless toe, while Jane fluttered her lashes at him rapidly with the appearance of one who blinks in too strong a light.

"Which one?"

She chuckled as she said it. A facer, she thought, in triumph. Robin frowned;

"Some one she met in town—Aunt Samantha said. . . ."

"Oh—that one! He's very nice and divinely good looking, from what she tells us. We expect him down for the week-end. Aunt Samantha is going to put him up and is thrilled to death at the prospect of a man in the house."

"Is that so? What's the lucky brute's name?"

"Dick Dangerfield. Ever hear of him. One of the Dangerfields of Richmond."

"Never heard of any of 'em. Sounds like a movie hero."

"Why, for mercy's sake," remarked Jane in apparent amazement, "you aren't *jealous*, are you?"

And departed, suddenly, leaving him to wonder whether he was or not. And if so, in the name of common sense, why?

The entire picnic party had a late tea at the Blue Moon; to the visible excitement of the few villagers sampling cinnamon toast within the blue and white walls, for it was the first time in history that John Wynne had been seen to enter a building on Main Street, or indeed on any street, much less to sit at the table with them and partake of tea. When Robin and Wynne left the tea room to paddle back to Winding River through the first starlight of the October evening, Wynne said suddenly;

"Have you observed, Robin, that I am really coming out of my shell? First, you; then, Laurel. Now Jane, and, by all the gods, Mrs. Holsapple! I can hardly believe it myself!"

"I'm glad," said Robin, looking affectionately at the dim figure, bulking very big and solid in the bow of the canoe. "After all, it's what you needed and what you've always wanted—whether you knew it or not—just *folks!*"

He was a little timid when he said it; he loved Wynne too well to wish to tread on sacred ground. But his friend nodded slowly and said, "I expect you're right, Robin. It was only—well, accursed sensitiveness . . . I've been missing a lot. . . ."

Robin, himself, was a most gregarious soul but there were times when he found "folks" a source of irritation. Specifically, from the following Friday to Monday and at intervals thereafter. During that first period he went twice to Aunt Samantha's to be met by Jane with the urgent request that he "play" with her, as "Laurel and Dangerous Dick were out, watching the leaves turn."

Subsequently Robin met Dangerfield in the flesh and was forced to subscribe to the general opinion that he was very attractive. A short, stocky man of thirty-odd with startling blue eyes, close cropped dark hair and an amazing vitality. That he was devoted to Laurel was patent. Aunt Samantha annoyed Robin with her air of "isn't-it-nice-now-that-it's-settled?" and Jane with her shrugs and forsaken, forlorn manner annoyed him even more.

He did not again seek Aunt Samantha's hospitality until well into the middle of the next week; working instead, with such concentrated fury that, Wynne, hearing the violent clatter of the typewriter,

often smiled to himself over a quiet pipe in the corner.

And indeed Jane spoke more truly than she knew. It was "Dangerous" Dick; a Dick who had loved lightly a score of times and from habit and who now found himself on the verge of something terribly serious—a fact which made him more dangerous than ever. Laurel, in the few days of constant companionship with a young and charming man, found herself wondering at her sudden capacity for camaraderie and pleasure. Surely, her heart was not in this! But it was soothing to her little, lonely vanity; it was pleasant to know that some one thought her very lovely, that one man would—perhaps—count the hours spent away from her as wasted, and would treasure the moments he was permitted to pass at her side. That was the way young Mr. Dangerfield made all women feel. In this instance he meant it. He had meant it before—but not quite as much.

Dangerfield was returning to Richmond in November and managed to get himself asked to Stonystream for all the remaining week-ends. He wound Aunt Samantha around his little finger, colossal though that task might seem. She declared aloud and brazenly that she couldn't resist him and would like to see the iron woman who could. Even Maggie resurrected from some limbo a starched cap with a pink bow at right angles upon it, which she perched upon her door-knob of hair the morning after Dangerfield's arrival. Robin, who

was, of course, informed of this innovation by Jane, remarked with some resentment that the man must be something out of a best-seller to have bewitched a household of sensible women—including Maggie.

He might have added—"and Laurel." There would have been some grain of truth in the statement.

For second best has an amazing charm, at times, when first best seems unattainable. There were moments when Laurel gravely questioned herself whether, after all, she would not be quite happy with Dick Dangerfield . . . oh, maybe not with Dick himself, but some one to care for her, some one for whom to care, and if he did the major part of the caring—why, after all, some one always had to, and it would mean hearth and home and babies. . . . But she could not thus reason with her heart.

The last week-end of Dick's appearance was very cold, but wonderfully clear, with a great moon hung like a frozen pearl against the black velvet sky. Dick, restless after supper, invited Laurel to go walking, while Aunt Samantha and Jane gravely immersed themselves in an exciting game of cribbage, interrupted by spoken and mental speculations, in the study. Laurel, meantime, muffled in woolly blue cloak, walked under the moon with Dick and presently stopped to sit on a stile and look out across the stubbled, dreaming fields.

It was all very sweet and still and her blood ran a little faster for the hint of winter—and perhaps

of danger—in the clear air. When Dick, standing beside her, abruptly put his arms about her and lifted her down, and close, in a strong embrace, she was terrified at her unconscious response and drew away from him sharply.

“Ah,” he said, “I’m sorry. No, I’m not. I’ll always be glad and remember. But Laurel—couldn’t you care?”

He was so earnest about it, frowning in his concentration, boyish and dear and not very eloquent. She came very near to loving him then.

“No, Dick.”

“*Never?*”

“*Never.*”

“That’s a long time,” said Dick, youthfully, taking her hands. “Is there any one else, Laurel?”

She was brave, she was truthful, she looked him in the eyes, and nodded; adding, painfully,

“But he doesn’t love me, Dick, either. So you see it’s just a muddle, all around—”

If Dick guessed, he was too much the gentleman born and bred to name names and merely said, “bless his blindness! Oh, that’s not kind, I know. But wait, little darling thing, you’ll love me yet. I’m going away to-morrow. But I’ll write and I’ll be back. I love you so much, my dear. And I want you so much . . . and need you so desperately. It seems to me that so great a strength of loving and wanting must awaken some response in your heart—some time. I’d be content with just a little.”

"No, you wouldn't," said Laurel sturdily. "That would be second best."

And wanted to tell him that it wasn't true. That just loving, silently and hard, went unanswered. She knew.

They walked back to the house quietly and Dick disappeared directly into his room. Laurel had very little to say to the cribbage players and after she had taken her leave of them, and kissed them both goodnight, the old eyes and the young eyes met across the board and Jane nodded her wise, red head.

"Turned him down. Flat. Bully for her."

"I don't know about that," said her opponent, "he's a nice boy—and he loves her. After all . . ."

They were silent then, both of them, each too loyal to mention Robin's name. But Jane in her heart said, "it wouldn't be like you, Laurel, to be faithless—" And Aunt Samantha in her older heart thought sadly, "poor child! Who knows—?"

CHAPTER XX

HOLIDAYS

*Whether the seasons swing around
To Christmas time or May,
Where love a clean-swept room has found,
The heart makes holiday.*

"Let's have a Halloween party!" said Jane, late in October to her hostess, "with pumpkins and everything. And maybe a fortune teller. Let's, Aunt Samantha, dear!"

"I never saw such a child," grumbled Mrs. Holsapple, affectionately, "if it isn't one thing, it's another. I declare, Jane, you live on excitement! I'd admire to see you sit still for ten minutes, with your hands folded and your mouth closed."

Laurel laughed and looked up from the new dishcloths she was hemming for the Blue Moon. The three of them were superintending the making of apple jelly, little jars of which were finding immediate sale in the tea-room.

"Can't be done," said Laurel, "she'd burst!"

Jane, a stick of cinnamon in one corner of her mouth, looked at her reproachfully. She was enveloped in a huge apron and appeared to be very

busy doing nothing whatever. Maggie was teaching her to cook, she said.

"Can so! But you'd send for a doctor before the ten minutes was up. Anyway, you need a little real pep around here. You're getting to be a regular old stick-in-the-mud, Laurel—Aunt Samantha's a lot livelier than you are. I made her what she is to-day, I hope she's satisfied!" paraphrased Jane, modestly. "Anyway, what about a Halloween party?"

"If you must, you must," Aunt Samantha replied, with resignation. "Send out your invitations, and tell me how many I must feed."

Jane gave her a kiss and a hug, flashed a look of triumph at Laurel, powdered Maggie's negligible nose with a handful of flour and ran off to her own room, tripping over the apron, to concoct her invitations.

In half an hour she brought a sample to Laurel, and stood aside, flushed with the effort of creation, a large blot of ink on her pink cheek.

Written or rather printed in black, on a ragged square of brown wrapping paper, the invitation read:

"You are invited to attend a Halloween celebration at the Holsapple House on Saturday night at eight o'clock. Appropriate costumes desirable but not obligatory. Any one who is not willing to be frightened to death, or who has not imagination enough to join in mystic rites will please decline. Come one, come

all and meet the ghosts of your past, present and future."

Aunt Samantha, with perfectly useless glasses on the round end of her nose, groaned.

"You're insane, child," she announced, "however, send 'em out and let's see who's fool enough to come."

Every one came; half of Stonystream; Robin came and John Wynne came; Poilu came, and was tied up in the barn, much to his disapproval. And all came to a house as dark as pitch, lighted only by flickering wax tapers and the grinning heads of enormous pumpkins.

There were hostesses in sheets, which once doffed, revealed Laurel in the wonderfully becoming costume of a gipsy fortune teller and Jane as the slimmest, prettiest Puck since Annie Russell charmed a country with her wistful mischief. And Aunt Samantha, as a witch, looking like nothing so much as an enormous black tent, as Robin irreverently whispered to Wynne. To Laurel's surprise and Jane's satisfaction, the two men had come in costumes also; "as long as we must go," Wynne had told Robin, half laughing, half frowning, "we might as well do the thing up brown—we'll send to New York for costumes. . . ." The result was a Stonystream gratified beyond words to view the eccentric playwright clad in the straight black garments and skull cap of an alchemist of early days, with a disturbingly real-looking white

beard and a heavy chain of "gold" around his neck. Robin was less interesting, Jane said, when she saw him, and rather less handsome, in the garb of the Black one himself, as interpreted by our Puritan ancestors; neat buckled shoes and hose and the gray-blue sober dress of the scholar.

Other guests arrived in sheets and pillowcases and the first part of the evening was spent in essaying mazes, following, in the dim light, twine guides through dark rooms and corridors, and finally, in the cellar, bobbing for apples and doing all the various amusing and thrilling things required by the season. Apple parings were flung lavishly here and there and Jane was in her element. But not until she descended the stone steps alone to Aunt Samantha's jelly-room, did she experience, as she afterwards said, a "real thrill." In her hand she held a mirror, and fearfully looked into it, as she reached the small dark enclosure, lighted by two flickering candles.

Laurel, gathering Aunt Samantha, Robin and Wynne about her, waited, laughing, at the top of the stairs. For a moment there was silence and then the three conspirators heard a small, genuine shriek. Jane had looked into her mirror to some purpose and only Jerry had saved it from shattering to pieces on the stone floor.

He rose from the darkness, laughed into her startled eyes and caught the glimmering piece of glass. "Bad luck for seven years," he warned.

They came up the steps together, Jane almost

speechless with amazement. "How—where—why—why . . . ? were her not very coherent remarks.

"I'm in the nature of a pleasant surprise," Jerry explained, modestly, shaking hands with his hostess and the two men, and nodding to Laurel who had smuggled him into the cellar. "When Laurel wrote me of the big doings—well, Dartmouth wasn't big enough to hold me, that's all. And it's time you met your fate, Jane," he added severely.

She had really been a little frightened . . . as if Jerry could frighten her—that was a strange thought, said Jane to herself. Her little heart beat fast under the close fitting green doublet and flew scarlet banners in her cheeks.

"Scared me to death," she grumbled, "disappointed me, too. I expected to see a cross between Douglas Fairbanks and the Prince of Wales in that mirror. But I'm glad you came—for Laurel," she added somewhat peevishly, for when the party had first been proposed, she herself had written Jerry, not knowing that Laurel had managed to reach him one mail ahead with strict instructions to decline the second invitation.

Fortune telling over, the entire party, about thirty in all, repaired to the kitchen where at one end the big stone fireplace blazed with logs, on which some one had flung lavish handfuls of salt. While the flames burned witchcraft-blue and the guests, on cushions, sat about and were fed toasted marshmallows and roasted chestnuts, Aunt Samantha's deep voice ran on in blood-curdling tales of

haunted houses. At the end of an hour the strongest man among them was glad when the lights were lit and the party invited to sit down at the bench-like tables and eat their Halloween supper. It was one o'clock before the last guest—which was Jerry—left the house—and as Jane remarked, it was plain to be seen that “a good time was had by all!”

She crept into Aunt Samantha's room that night to thank her.

“It was wonderful!” she said, “and I know how just fresh I was to ask for it. But everyone loved it. Did you see anything like John Wynne? Did my eyes deceive me or was he dancing with Maggie? Whose phonograph was that?”

“Jerry brought it up in a taxi,” said Aunt Samantha from the vasty deep of her pillows. “I'm glad you enjoyed yourself, child. So did I.”

Jane went back to bed chuckling. If Laurel had arranged for her to see Jerry in the mirror, she had arranged for Laurel to see Robin. And without Robin's knowledge. What delighted her more than anything about the clever trick she had played was the fact that neither Robin nor Laurel confessed to seeing each other in the mirror. That, thought Jane, hugging her slim little blue-pyjamaed self as she lay in bed, was very significant. And fell asleep—to pleasant dreams in which neither the Prince of Wales nor Douglas Fairbanks conspicuously figured.

Thanksgiving came and went. Laurel had been

a little puzzled about this holiday. Where and with whom would she spend it? At "home" with Aunt Samantha and Jane, or in New York with the Adamses? But this question was solved for her long before the day came around, as Uncle George and Aunt Frances suddenly and surprisingly packed up and sailed for France to be with Elaine until after New Year's. As Elaine was coming over in the Spring, it was decided that Mr. Adams should take his summer vacation in the early Winter and by this clever manipulation of time and events, manage to gain an extra holiday period with his "children." Therefore, Thanksgiving and Christmas, too, were happy days for Aunt Samantha. She prepared for each of the festal occasions a feast more marvellous than that of Belshazzar, who, one admits, must have set a pretty good table, and to these festivities were bidden, not only her two girls, but Robin, Robin's mother and Mr. Wynne. And Wynne came, not causing as much surprise as he might have done some time earlier. People were beginning to get used to his appearance by now. In this case, it was Jane who persuaded him:

"It would be *wretched* of you," she informed him, "to stick off by yourself, mean and selfish. And as I can't have a mother at the parties, I think you might come and stand *in loco parentis* for me."

She was so fascinated by her Latin tag that her eyes shone and a radiant smile dimpled cheeks that were growing amazingly round under the Holsapple régime. Wynne, laughing, gave in. He had

never fought the project very hard; he was beginning to enjoy people, just people, too much. And admitted afterwards that he had not had as happy a Thanksgiving or Christmas since those far days when Christmas and Thanksgiving had really meant something to him. If for nothing else he was glad he had gone, because of Robin's mother. On the day they first met, the others left them alone for a time, feeling that Mrs. Hood would be glad to have an intimate little talk with the man who had done so much for her boy. Robin was ten years younger than himself with delight, so much he wished these two to become known, one to the other. They sat together in the study and talked, for perhaps an hour, perhaps less, and at the end of their pleasant solitude knew that each had found a friend.

Christmas was rich in gifts and laughter. Jerry was home again for all the long holidays, and in a spirit entirely festive, took his kiss from Jane under the massed mistletoe. It was a playful gesture but coloured with all the tenderness of his loyal young heart. And Jane, very rosy, escaping from the light urgency of his arms, fled to her room and sat before an ancient dim mirror, with both hands against the warmth of her cheeks.

"Flapper! I believe—I believe you are growing up!" she said to her charming reflection. And nodded her red head in affirmation.

Laurel had happiness in her eyes like stars. Flowers and candy had come, in lavish amounts,

with a card attached which bore a Richmond address; Mrs. Hood had given her the tiniest, daintiest string of Oriental pearls, something a fairy might have dreamed and woven from dew and flower petals; Wynne had sent her the books she long had wanted, and Robin had not forgotten her, as a pile of suède-bound song-books, Brahms, Grieg, French and English ballads, testified. No one was forgotten that day, not Aunt Samantha, not Jane, who sat on the floor on her slim heels with her gifts all around her, her mother's check negligently pinned to her frock over her heart by the bar of silver and jade Jerry had given her, and crowed with delight. The best parlor was open for this tremendous occasion; and even aired, which was a real event. And a huge Christmas tree which Robin, Wynne and Jerry had cut and set in place and the women had trimmed, shone graciously over them all. Every one was happy! But Jane, I think, the happiest of them all. It was Christmas, every one was so good to her, she was nineteen, Jerry was home from college. . . . After all is said and done, that is the sweetest time, the time of just-awakening, a Sleeping Beauty period of life, the natural coming together of two young things half blind with the joy of their own youth. . . .

Elaine had sent Laurel a little frock from Paris by an acquaintance who had landed in the States shortly before Christmas. It was a dear little morsel of blue velvet with straight, mediæval lines, a bit of lovely sable at wrists and throat and a

girdle heavy with dull gold. She had never looked prettier, or indeed as pretty, and was never more joyously confident of that fact, as she sat at the foot of the Christmas table beside Robin, and bore with serenity the comments of Jane and Jerry on the orchids which reposed in a basket in front of her. She had refused to wear them, as they might "spoil the dress."

Said Robin, with a hint of viciousness;

"Too bad Dangerfield couldn't be here with us. It would just complete the party!"

Jane's quick ears caught the remark. And she whispered in Jerry's duller ones;

"Aren't men *cats*! Worse than women . . . if I ever catch you— Oh, listen to Laurel!"

For Laurel, very stately, was answering,

"Yes, isn't it? He did so hope to come—Aunt Samantha asked him, you know . . . but, of course, he had to stay with his own people."

Robin grunted, Jane giggled and pinched Jerry under the white tablecloth with superb effect—and had her hand held as punishment for quite three minutes after—and at this opportune moment Aunt Samantha elected to raise her glass of cider, and with her black eyes shining, proposed the old toast to "The Absent."

There were carols that night, with Anne Hood at the ancient piano, and some neighbors in to drink a glass of cider and join in the singing. It was an evening of pictures, charming pictures, some unfinished, some complete in themselves. . . . Jane and

Jerry sharing a hymn book, standing, unconscious of the fact, under the mistletoe once more, singing their hearts out. . . . Jane and Jerry, very sober, sitting on the floor to wind up an intricate top, their heads close together, their hands touching fleetly across the toy. . . . Robin's dark head bent over the piano, as he turned the music for his mother. . . . Laurel, standing alone by the Christmas tree, her hands clasped in front of her, her chin lifted and her eyes fixed on some unearthly vision, singing, all alone, that most lovely and touching Christmas song, "*Oh Little Town of Bethlehem.*" . . . Maggie, in the doorway, her hands twisted in a clean apron and her shrewd old eyes misted with tears. . . . John Wynne, with something like peace on his heavy face, replacing with oddly tender fingers the little wax angel which had fallen from the tree. . . . And outside, in the black night, the first frail flakes of snow falling softly to bare earth.

CHAPTER XXI

EXIT THE FLAPPER

*Love time and lilac time and dew upon the rose,
How love comes and why he comes, mortal never
knows,
Love is older than the stars and older than the skies,
Yet younger than the youngest thing that ever read
his eyes.*

The snow that had started Christmas evening, continued to fall all that night with a persistence, a soft tenacity of purpose, steadily and unceasingly. And for two days thereafter to the delight of Jane and Jerry who were hugely excited by the prospect of sleighing and sledding. When the sun finally made a belated appearance and the air was clear of little flakes, a sudden high wind picked up the snow and drifted it into great, fantastic shapes and mounds, then dropped as suddenly as it had come, leaving a soft, white world, sparkling under the blue light of the sky, still and serene and very inviting. When the sun came out in full glory, so did Jane, in knickerbockers and a jolly white over-the-head-and-darn-the-hair sweater, with a dunce's cap of white wool, flying a provocative tassel, pulled down tight over the red curls. Jerry, mit-

tened and sweated, likewise, waited her with the dappled steed of a gayly painted sled and the two of them piled on it regardless and spun off, down the hill in front of Aunt Samantha's with Laurel cheering their progress from the study window. An hour of this strenuous sport only whetted their appetite for more and Robin, driving up to the house in a borrowed sleigh to see how the party fared and to escort his mother to the station, halted his craft at a level turn in the hill road, tossed the reins to Wynne and alighted hastily, just in time to pick Jane out of a snow drift into which she had catapulted head first, and from which a pair of frantic, golf-stockinged legs waved helplessly. He set her on her feet, brushed some of the clinging snow from her person, asked severely what she meant by essaying the hill and congratulated her that she had not tried the road and upset him also. Then it occurred to him, at her question, to look around for Jerry. But Jerry was at the fenced bottom of the hill, having crashed magnificently into a gate post, and was lying there, motionless, very game and smiling, with a broken leg.

This was a fine finish for a holiday. Robin reached him almost as soon as Jane, hailed Wynne, who drove the sleigh to the house, tethered the patient horse and came down the hill like a twenty-year-old, when, after some debate, the two men carried the warrior off the snowy field and into Aunt Samantha's, where he remained to his parents' consternation and to Jane's delight, for she was

able to prove herself, in this emergency, an amazingly efficient and quiet little nurse, and the one, above all others, whom Jerry most preferred.

Aunt Samantha was at her element in a sick room, and the doctor departed that afternoon certain that Jerry would recover, if not spoiled to death meanwhile. The study, into which he was first carried, was converted into a ward, a hospital cot brought from another room, and Jerry was installed there with three devoted women to wait on him—four, until Mrs. Hood left—and with Wynne and Robin dropping in all hours of the day and night to inquire after his health.

The break was clean, it was set correctly and the outraged bones knitted beautifully. Jerry's appetite did not suffer as much as he did and Aunt Samantha and Maggie were kept busy thinking up new and tempting delicacies. The dusky cook from the Blue Moon was much concerned over the accident to one of her favorite customers, and herself trudged up the hill one morning with interesting animal cookies and a fat chocolate cake. And all Stonystream called to commiserate.

But the invalid was Jane's property. She let that be known abroad, and was with him all day and slept with her door wide open at night lest he call, become feverish, faint away, rebreak the wounded limb! Jerry accepted her attention with gratitude and took a base advantage of her one evening, when convalescent, and a little weak from pain, he caught her hand and drew her down be-

side him on the narrow cot. The red china lamp that was Aunt Samantha's especial pride, burned low and a little coal fire glowed gaily in the black iron grate, weaving strange shadows in the cosy, warm room.

"Oh, Jane, but you're a dear!" said Jerry, very huskily.

She tried to pull her hand away, but either her heart was not wholly in the deed, or her invalid showed astounding strength. Jane gave up the unequal struggle, obeyed her heart, and let the hand stay where it was. She sat, quite still, beside him, and the red curls partially hid from him a rather colorless face.

Jerry's clasp tightened; under his breath he said—but perhaps it was the raving of delirium—"*eventually—why not now?*"

She made no answer. Indeed, there was none to make. But a dear little smile curved her sober lips and she glanced at him from under the flaming mop as an engaging cocker spaniel might have done.

"It hasn't all been—just fun—to you, has it?" he asked her then, gravely.

She shook her head violently. The curls danced before her tell-tale eyes and shut out from her, momentarily, the strange sight of Jerry's serious and pleading face.

"Would you care," he asked her, "if I didn't finish college? I've been offered a wonderful job by the father of my roommate. Anytime I care

to take it. It's out West—you wouldn't mind that, would you? Going so far away?"

"No." She hurried a little after that one word of complete confession. "But—*do* finish college, Jerry. You know," and here her voice was so low that he barely heard her, but as steady as her loyalty, "mother doesn't want me to marry until I am twenty-one. There'll be some money then for us to start out with, from my father. That's—only two years—less than two years, really. And I'll wait. . . ."

"Promise?"

She promised, very solemnly, her eyes on his. Bent then, and kissed him briefly, sweetly, with the fragrant, innocent caress of apple blossoms, just brushing across his lips, and then, freeing herself, stood up.

"Let's not talk about it any more," Jane said, "it's settled. And . . . and Jerry, we do care *so* much . . . let's pretend, just for a little longer, that we're not engaged or anything. . . . I'm growing up so fast," she said, "it gives me an ache here—and lightly, for a moment, she laid her clasped hands against her round young breasts. . . . "And I don't want to grow up *too* quickly, Jerry."

He was very young but he understood what she herself did not know she meant. He reached out to recapture those somehow tragic little hands and laid his lips reverently and tenderly against their pink palms.

"All right," said Jerry, "I understand! We'll

just go on as we were until you're twenty-one. And we'll be loving each other all the time and knowing. And you'll wait. That's all I want, your promise to wait. If you find you can't keep it, and stay true to your heart, Jane, you must tell me. You know I'll release you—I mean, if someone else comes along. . . ."

Jane looked at him a moment, and then turned away. At the door she looked back again, over her shoulder,

"There won't be any one else," she said, "and I'll be waiting. *I never change my mind!*" announced Jane, with some arrogance.

And, to do her justice, in this instance she was quite as good as her word.

After Aunt Samantha had settled her charge for the night, superintended the drinking of a cup of hot milk, quenched the light of the china lamp and left a little nightlight to float like a fairy boat in a basin of water and a brass dinner bell by Jerry's bedside in case he should "need anything," she left him ponderously, and he lay awake for a long time watching the sullen red shining of the coals, listening to the snow blow sharply against the window panes, to the little click of embers in the grate. He was content. And he was glad that Jane had chosen as she had. He would help her all he could. There was something knightly about Jerry; his blood ran hot; but it was good heat and chivalrous, and he had harboured white ideals in secret these many years. And was wise, too, with

the wisdom of the clean heart. He knew instinctively what Jane felt, but could not express even to herself, that she wanted her "growing up" to be free from the fevers and fret of a long engagement, with its half licenses; wanted to come to him ultimately, as his wife, with her lips as dewy and young as they now were, with no tawdry marks of handling and habit on the lovely veil of her innocence and youth.

And Jerry, loving her, loved her all the more for that temporary withdrawal, and guessed dimly how sweet and full the eventual surrender would be.

While he slept, Jane, wide awake in her room upstairs, thought of him and said her little prayers. It had all happened just as she would have wished it. And her heart was more Jerry's than ever for his understanding. Later, when she was older, when she had known wifedom and motherhood, she was to look back on that brief scene in the study and feel for Jerry a great gratitude and reverence. For all the gifts he was to bring her with the years, there was none greater than that comprehension. But now, unawakened, she merely knew that she was "glad Jerry felt the same way," and rose, presently, to light a candle, and write a funny, incoherent, blotted letter to her mother, which Naida Van Wyck read in a distant land, with wet eyes and much tenderness for the two gallant young people who belonged to her and who had settled their questions and decided their fate thousands of miles away with help from no one save each other.

So Jane remains Jane to the end of this chapter. But the Flapper was gone, forever, exorcised by the first spoken word of love; the first touch of life and reality.

CHAPTER XXII

UNDERCURRENTS

*The artist soul has cruel and restless wings;
Love may not follow where they sometimes lead;
Love, sick with failure, beating futile hands,
Love, stumbling after on small, human feet
Bleeding and bruised. . . .*

With Jerry, limping, but well again, back in college, the Holsapple House settled once more to its usual routine and the winter slipped by, happily and easily for all within those dear and dingy walls. Laurel went up to town after New Year's to meet her uncle and aunt at the boat and to be with them for a time, and to hear, with what eager ears, all their prideful stories of Elaine, listening for hours trying to picture her cousin as the young *chatelaine*, marvelling over the pictures of Etienne's small, white *hôtel* in the Faubourg St. Germain, of his country place outside of Paris, and looking with even more amazement at the newest photographs of Elaine, tall and dignified and so much become, in these few months, a woman of the world,

While Laurel stayed with them, Uncle George managed to be home at tea time—a “foreign trick” his Frances had picked up abroad—and the

three of them would sit over the teacups and talk, while a wind roared up the Drive and the battle-ships, riding at anchor in the River, were picked out in yellow lights. After the first two days were passed, Aunt Frances, turning for the moment from talk of Elaine, and mindful of certain letters from Aunt Samantha, looked at her niece a little sharply and inquired, with suddenness:

"What about this beau of yours we hear so much about these days?"

"What, indeed, about him?" counter-questioned Laurel, lazily. "You know him almost as well as I do— Didn't I meet him right here, in this very room?"

Uncle George laughed, largely,

"Don't hedge," he ordered, "you know perfectly well that your aunt wants to know if you are thinking of getting married. . . . Not that any one but a woman would ask such a personal question," he added, severely. And believed it.

Laurel passed her cup for more and answered demurely;

"Well, dears, you both know that every girl *thinks* of getting married!"

"So that's that," said Uncle George, enjoying his wife's defeat.

After a crowded week in town Laurel returned to Stonystream and stayed there to work and play with Jane and Aunt Samantha and to run the successful Blue Moon until Mrs. Van Wyck, return-

ing from her tour of the Orient, when the early Spring flushed the peach trees with pale pink and the bluebirds went about their musical business, demanded her child back again. There was a positively painful parting between Aunt Samantha and her youngest charge, and a poignantly regretful one between Jane and the conquered John Wynne. But nothing is ever as bad as it seems, and after departing in tears from Stonystream, Jane wrote quite happily from Hot Springs that her mother had taken rooms at the Inn for the summer. "Jerry wrote and *made* her!" she added with a little black flourish of pride and triumph.

Events trod on each other's heels after that. Just before Elaine's arrival, while Laurel was superintending armies of scrub-women at Adams House, Robin's second play went on at the new little Robinhood Playhouse, not too far from Washington Square. Stonystream was amply represented, in weight and authority, if not in numbers, as Aunt Samantha shared a box with the Hoods, Laurel, and Mr. Wynne, and more than shared it, as the others could have testified. In the opposite box were Jane, her mother and Jerry, and the two parties met afterwards for supper, a supper at which Mr. Wynne, to his own slight amazement, charmingly presided.

The theatre was quite lovely, all in forestry greys and greens; the play held Laurel in utter astonishment, for she had had no inkling of its nature before, although she had begged Robin and Wynne

often enough to be let into the secret. Robin, on that little stage, built character. The name of the play was "Undine," and it was the story of a woman who finds a soul. There was in it a hint of Robin's own story, as a starting point, a revelation of first love and wounded pride; but it was not alone Robin's story, it was that of hundreds like him, delicately and surely told, charmingly and simply unfolded; as true as truth and haunting as fable. Laurel's eyes were wet for all the world to witness, but her heart sang within her. For the play told her a great deal more than Undine's story of growth. Robin had forgiven Elaine, it said, he was happy once more, he was wholly healed. She realized that she had known this subconsciously for some time; it had only needed the play to open her eyes to her knowledge. What perhaps she did not guess was that, all unknowing and with sheer delight in his tools and his craftsmanship, Robin had had recourse to the panacea so many writers have found before him and shall find, veritable balm in Gilead, as long as man sets pen to paper. In a word, the first hurt once mended, the tragedy a little softened by time, Robin had "written his heart" out, and with it all bitterness and sense of failure. And the heart was, as Laurel guessed, clean swept and waiting, empty of despair, a remodelled house which patiently bid for occupancy.

Shortly after the successful launching of the play, as soon as he was sure of crowded houses and of a

clear road ahead, Robin sailed for Europe with his mother. He had promised her this trip and was glad to be able to keep his word and get away for a time. He left John Wynne, solemnly, in Laurel's care. "Look out after him, Laurel, and Poilu, too," he commanded, rather than suggested, "and remember that I expect to hear from you by every boat!"

From the ship, entrusted to the pilot, a line of pencilled warning came to her;

"Near Sandy Hook, *S. S. Majestic*.

"Dear Laurel,

"I forgot to ask you not to go and get married while we are away.

"Yours,

"ROBIN."

A day later a wireless reached her.

"Wonderful weather we wish you were with us dont forget what I asked you in pilot letter why not wireless answer and set our minds at rest love robin"

Laurel laughed a little and frowned a little over this remarkable idiocy and wirelessly the ship, sedately;

"Think I can safely promise love to your mother Laurel"

Then she sat down to answer his note. The letter which was to go to the Hotel Savoy was long,

but not long enough to take her as many hours to compose as it did; and her waste basket was full of torn papers before the finished and approved product lay ready for its envelope and stamp:

“Stonystream, April 10th,

“Dear Robin;

“I have your pilot letter, likewise your extravagant wireless, and oh, how ridiculous you are! I have seen Mr. Wynne once since you left. He came here and called and we went for a walk together. I found him looking tired and am sure he misses you already. Don't stay away too long, you have grown to mean so much to him, he leans on you so. Poilu is also desolate. He tagged along at our heels like a lost soul and seemed to be mutely asking where there was any justice to be found in life, for a dog whose master picks up and deserts him on the least provocation.

“Elaine arrives next week, I am glad that you gave me a message for her before you left. To-morrow Uncle George and Aunt Frances come out for good. They will stay all summer, as perhaps I told you, and Adams House is open so that Elaine may literally come home. She wished no other doctor except her own, you see, he brought her into the world and has watched over her always, until her marriage.

“I am afraid that Uncle George will really sell Adams House in the Fall. He talks of it. Things have gone so well with him recently that I would not be at all surprised if he retired; he and Aunt Frances are simple people and do not demand much. I half fancy they might even settle abroad. Elaine is all they have—really—I'm just a little, extra person to them much as they care for me. But Elaine and

Elaine's child will make up their whole world and this is quite as it should be. But it will break my heart to see Adams House go to strangers.

"You asked me before you left what my plans would be. I have none. Aunt Samantha wants me to stay with her, that is probably what I shall do. I have been working a little—just singing and playing—at the Home for Crippled Children over in Lakeport. I like it, although it depresses me, and shall keep on with it. Also I shall have Jane near me all summer, which is a delightful prospect, and the Blue Moon to oversee.

"I do hope you have a marvellous trip. Give my love to your dear mother and tell her I shall write her very soon.

"Yours,
"LAUREL."

But still another letter to Robin was written, as fast as her pen could move, and addressed to the apple tree.

"Dearest ;

"So absurd you are with your wireless and your little note. I am very happy to-day. It seems that you are really beginning to care—or, is it just that you have settled down and I have become so familiar and undisturbing a part of your sober, everyday life that you could resent any change which took me out of it? I didn't tell you in my letter, for fear you might think it just feminine trickery—but I may see Dick Dangerfield soon. Oh, you need never worry—should you worry—about him—not even ever so slightly. We are not for one another, Dick and I! But some-

times I reproach myself a little, Robin, for I feel that I have not been wholly faithful to you. In some strange, spiritual sense I have been disloyal. I mean, I have wondered if Dick, after all, did not have most precious gifts to offer, which I should be insane to refuse. I have even imagined myself married to Dick—have played with the thought for a little while. And sometimes—even now—! You see, it's not easy to go on loving, just to go on. . . . What you give me is very dear to me, I cherish it, but there are times when my pride rises up and rebels against all this silence and this waste of caring. Or, is it waste? I don't know. If it has made me miserable, it has also made me happy. . . . I shall post this now in the apple tree, darling, where so many little letters are posted. God keep you. I love you.

“LAUREL.”

When she had finished, she sealed her letters in their waiting envelopes and ran out with them, first to the postoffice on Main Street, then to the postbox in the garden of Adams House; and in that garden she walked for a long time before returning, rosy and high hearted, to Aunt Samantha. For the courageous bulbs were glowing white and pink, yellow and scarlet, veritable beds of little balloons, and the fruit trees were snowy with drifting fragrant bloom. Stonystream was always ahead of the calendar with spring greetings, and had, this year, surpassed itself.

“You look happy,” remarked Mrs. Holsapple at supper that night.

“I am very happy,” Laurel smiled at her over

"the crust" which Maggie always saved for her. "Elaine will soon be here, her room is ready for her. I shall see Etienne again and we shall talk and talk and talk. . . ."

Mrs. Holsapple sighed voluminously.

"But you won't desert me entirely?" she pleaded. "I did count on you for all summer, Laurel! You've done me more good than a caseful of medicine—and I need you. What with both you and Jane gone, I don't know what I'll do!"

"Oh, Aunt Samantha!" expostulated Laurel, "you old fraud! As if you ever were sick!"

"Heartsick," the big woman answered gravely, "lonesome sick—just for folks of my own. That's what you are to me, Laurel—a little thing that *belongs*."

Laurel flew around the table to kiss her.

"I'll be here every day," she promised, "and for some of the nights. And at the Blue Moon, too. And you'll see Jane—you couldn't keep her away. And Jerry will be living on the door step, and Mr. Wynne— Why, you'll have a houseful all the time. And in the Fall, I'll come back to you, Aunt Samantha."

The following week, Laurel moved back to Adams House. She did not go to town to meet the boat, but stayed home to fill the old house with flowers, till from every nook and corner, tulips and daffodils, narcissi and early lilacs fragrantly beckoned and smiled. The fireplaces were filled with young branches, misty green, and the big

guest room that was to be Elaine's, with the new bath and the smaller room just off it, "for the baby," were sweet and fragrant and shining with painted furniture, with gay, delightful cretonnes, freshly tinted walls and new rag carpets.

So, finally, back to Adams House came Elaine, with her parents, her husband, her maid; with trunks and bags, gifts and laughter, with tears and hope, her young beauty deepened and softened, her young dignity serene and lovely in the long draperies she wore; and wore as if, all her life, she had been clothed by the Rue de la Paix.

Laurel found Etienne happily unchanged. He was as he had always been, affectionate and charming to her, the perfect brother of her only-child dreams. Elaine had grown older, her cousin thought, and more beautiful. She spoke by now a passable French and had, somehow, acquired the *grande dame* manner. Uncle George, listening in on conversations between his daughter and her maid in the latter vivacious, round-eyed person's own language, was pathetic with pride. Aunt Fanny, for once in her life was almost speechless. And Laurel, somehow, curiously touched; never more so than when, at different times, she found the two elderly people poring over French grammars and laboriously learning, "*The cat of my aunt in under the green baize table of the wine merchant's sister,*" in order that, when they again went to Paris, they would not disgrace their child by an ignorance of her adopted tongue.

When the first rapture of the arrival had subsided and the flow of curious callers to Adams House had been somewhat stemmed by time, Laurel found herself studying Elaine with a certain curiosity. Something seemed lacking—or, was something added? Or, both? She did not know, and as the days went by she found it very easy to imagine Elaine as hostess in Paris; to picture her moving graciously in the exquisite setting of the ancient country place outside the town where the de Gabriacs spent much of their time, and where, it was hinted, they would remove altogether after their return to France.

“It will be better for the baby,” Elaine had placidly decided, and so it was, tacitly, settled.

It took Laurel some days to discover what it was that had subconsciously troubled her about this new cousin. And the discovery took her breath, for she had not dreamed Elaine capable of any deep emotion. But it was quite plain to her that the young wife was desperately jealous of her husband. “*Wrath is cruel and anger is outrageous; but who is able to stand before jealousy?*” It was not, Laurel knew, in the grosser sense, that Elaine felt this defeat. She was clean-minded and well aware also of her own beauty and knew, as Laurel knew, that no other woman could disturb, for a moment, the deep, warm current of Etienne’s love for her. The jealousy was of a different nature, an emotion more subtle and less easy to cope with, as it was directed entirely against Etienne’s pro-

fession and his love for his profession. She even resented Laurel, who could make his eyes shine with her singing, and to whom he spoke so gravely and reverently of the gift of music. For Elaine was quite unmusical; she cared for music only when it contained a melody which pleased her untrained ear; she was utterly without knowledge of the art, wholly without comprehension, born without musical taste. And so, all these months, she had been deeply unhappy, had felt terror and dislike of the thing, a mere combination of sounds made on ivory, or catgut, or in the human throat, which, in some measure, took her man away from her. But she had been amply warned.

Something, then, of this Laurel guessed. And wondered how much Etienne knew. It was not likely that with his sensitiveness and his great passion for his wife, the lack of sympathy in her had not been brought often and sharply to his mind. And,—this was very clear to Laurel,—Elaine was staking much on the coming of the first child, hoping and believing that in the deep-rooted Latin sense of responsibility, pride in paternity, and love for the life of the family, Etienne would relegate his music to a lesser, and, in Elaine's eyes, a more proportionate place.

Once and once only she spoke to Laurel on this subject.

"I wish," she said, lying back on the pillow-heaped chaise lounge in her new room, the powder-blue curtains lifting and falling in the fresh Spring

breeze, "I wish that Etienne would give up playing in public. He has made his name, he does not need the money," added New England Elaine, "and it takes him away so much. He was just back from a concert tour of the southern cities before we sailed. I hardly saw him. In my condition I was, of course, not able to go with him. Nor on his earlier tour, in England. I was too miserable then. Laurel—never, never marry an artist!"

She had the air of a pictured Madonna, with the blue cushions all about her, but her eyes were heavy and the red mouth was set in a line that added years to her actual age. Laurel was appalled.

"I should think you'd be so proud," she said, rather diffidently, "to know that he belongs to you, this great musician whom thousands revere. . . ."

The white lids lifted; and dropped again;

"Ah—but does he belong to me?" asked Elaine, in a fierce, hushed little voice, beating one clenched hand softly against the pillows. "*Does he . . . ?*"

Laurel had no answer and welcomed the light step of Elaine's personal maid. And once more she marvelled at her provincial-born cousin as she saw her turn lazily on the cushions, her face very calm, very beautiful and most indifferent, and rising, give herself over into Susanne's experienced hands, in order to be properly disrobed for the night.

Something of humour took Laurel then, back in her own room, the room that had been Elaine's as

well as hers. She found herself thinking of the many nights they had slept there together, of Elaine quite capably undressing her own slim self, of the high-necked, long-sleeved nightgowns Aunt Frances insisted upon because she "once knew a girl who had gone into galloping consumption from wearing just such a flimsy makeshift thing," as the young Elaine demanded. And now wore.

"It is not the least wonderful of human traits, this one of adaptability," mused Laurel sententially, as she climbed into the narrow bed, with no wage-earning fingers, save her own, to aid her. "I wonder what she would have been like if she had married Robin?"

There was no answer to this question, either. And Laurel fell asleep on the wise conclusion that Elaine was one of those not unusual beings, a beautifully illuminated but blank page—upon which every person and event would find room to write.

Both Elaine and Etienne asked for news of the Hoods. Laurel gave it to them, answering the former's languor and the latter's interest with a little hesitation, addressing herself more to Etienne than to her cousin. But, a day or so later, alone with Elaine, she gave her the message Robin had sent her the day before he sailed;

"Tell Elaine I shall be thinking of her. Give them both my love. I hope to see them when I come back. Wish her good luck, Laurel, will you?"

"Oh, Robin!" Elaine smiled a little, "so he has forgiven me! I am glad, I disliked to think of his

remembering me with any rancour. Give him my love, Laurel, will you? Will they return before we leave? Would he call here with Mrs. Hood, do you think? You think he might? Well, it is his affair, of course—but I would like to see him. Etienne is so interested in his plays. He is going to town to see the new one, he says, he and father.”

The plays were quite safe as conversational topics. Laurel expounded happily on the new theatre and on Robin’s success with it; on his plans to produce, with Mr. Wynne’s backing, plays of others as well as his own, after his return from Europe, and under his personal management, and of the manager, the clever young assistant Wynne had found for him, who had been left in charge. “He’ll pick up some plays abroad,” Laurel said, “I know there are two or three he is anxious to get. . . .”

But, really, Elaine was not listening.

“How old are you, Laurel?” she asked. “Twenty seven? The sunny side of thirty? and—you were never so pretty. What about that southern boy, you didn’t write me much of him but mother did, and, when she was with us, she had such amusing letters from Aunt Samantha. I wish you had seen mother and father in Paris, Laurel, they were like two children. . . . Well, what is his name and where is he?”

“You’re getting as grasshopperish and irrelevant as Aunt Frances,” cautioned Laurel. “Dangerfield. Nothing about him. In Richmond. I hear from him often. He will be in New York this summer.”

You may have the good fortune to see him. He will adore you at once."

"You always were exasperating," Elaine said. "Aren't you ever going to get married?"

They were sitting together in the old swing, Elaine wrapped in a soft angora cape, of the blue that became her so well, and the daffodil head was bent low over some fine white sewing. Laurel touched her on the knee in a swift appreciative caress;

"How lovely you are! No, why should I get married? How do I know whether I shall or not? I'm happy just 'as is.' Aunt Samantha needs me. I'm awfully interested in the little tea room and in other things I managed to do in the town here. I shall have Jane to play with, after a bit—and a little De Gabriac to adore. Wait till you see Jane, Elaine. I suppose it's an open secret that she and Jerry are serious 'about it!'" Well—that's that. I have quite enough money to get along on. You'd be surprised at the weekly stipend Aunt Samantha insisted on paying me for doing nothing but eat her out of house and home and smear a little paint on The Blue Moon. I'm on half pay now, though, I saw to that."

"Well," said Elaine with one of the flashes of venal wisdom which Laurel found so strange in her, "if you can live alone and have money and an interest in life I don't suppose you need any pity. The contrary, perhaps. And if no man appears,

without whom you *can't* live—why, you're well off. It isn't being happy with a person that counts, it's being unhappy without them. If my baby is a daughter, I'm going to give her just one motto to take through life with her, 'don't marry unless you can't help yourself.' Why are your eyes so big, Laurel? Have I shocked you? But it's all true—and if you go along as you do now, even happily married women will envy you—though they wouldn't really change places with you on any considerations."

"You speak in paradoxes, Lily Maiden . . . remember Robin's name for you?" asked Laurel, secure in the knowledge that such references would neither embarrass Elaine nor hurt her own heart. "Perhaps you're right. '*And still the marvel grew, that one small head . . .*' or words to that effect," said Laurel, laughing. "But," sobering suddenly, it's well enough to be a bachelor girl through the years—even unto the sixties perhaps. But, just living would be lovely—later. What about children, Oracle?"

Elaine did not answer for a moment. When her Delphic utterance came, it was slow and the words dragged a little. . . .

"If you are the mother type of woman, then by all means marry. You will be miserable if you don't. In that case the man doesn't matter much anyway; he is a symbol, a means to an end. But the woman who is wholly wife, looks on her children as one more bond between herself and her

husband. She loves them because they are *his*; not because they are *hers*, or because they are children. And they are not necessary, except as ties to hold the man more closely to her."

After some moments of silence she added;

"But there are some women who need neither man nor child to content them."

In bed that night, pondering on the conversation, Laurel thought of Elaine as the loneliest woman she had ever known; a condition brought about by Elaine's own ineradicable traits of character and attitude toward life. If her heart had grown deep, it was still narrow; she was essentially selfish. Laurel marvelled that a year could make so great a change in her, that is, could have brought her to self expression. She remembered the Elaine she had known and lived with, as rather quiet, not given to philosophy nor to small talk, not appealing to those nearest her as a thinker. A girl, moreover, who had lived in a groove, whose education had ended with high school, whose knowledge of life was as limited as her knowledge of the life in books. Etienne had taught her more than he knew. She could not be all parrot! And Laurel wondered with pure pity and tenderness, if Elaine's love would not adjust itself and broaden to meet the unconscious demands Etienne would make upon it. Wondered, too, if Elaine would not have been far happier with a mate of commonplace mould, whom she could have loved with a commonplace love—if love is ever that—with whom she might

have grown old in peace and with a comfortable complacency. But it was a very strange turn of the wheel which had caught up Elaine, helpless, from her quiet rut and her simple vanities, with all her puritan instincts, instincts which shrank from the sunny paganism of art, and placed her, with her middle class mind, in the midst of an ancient, sunny, aristocratic city, with a public personage for a husband, and one who had aroused within her emotions that generations of New England women had been taught and trained to suppress.

“And yet,” Laurel added wisely to herself, “whatever the penalty, she has had and will always have marvellous compensation. And that is what she must learn to see as the years go by.”

Envious and pitiful, she lay still a little longer and faced, with her vivid sympathies, her imagination aroused and clamouring for expression, a wakeful and exhausting night.

CHAPTER XXIII

WHAT ROBIN WROTE

*Oh, I might sing my heart out,
For all the world to hear
Or write my love in verses,
In glowing words and clear;
But all my secret fancies
Are never yours to know,
Until you dream you love me,
And, waking, tell me so!*

April was just beginning to think of May, when a cable reached Laurel from London;

“Just back from paris have your dear letter am writing at once tremendously happy all my love robin.”

Mercifully she was alone as she read it, once, twice, and then fled to the orchard to read it fifty times again. Incredulity, happiness, terror and a blank amazement struggled for supremacy in her bewildered mind. Her “dear letter?” What could Robin mean? She sat down on the grass underneath the apple tree and held the message tightly between her two hands while her thoughts raced about, undirected and coming to no conclu-

sion. Yes. She had written Robin—on the tenth of the month, she remembered—a commonplace letter like many of her letters to him. She had mailed it, she recalled mailing it—and had, at the same time, posted another letter in the apple tree—Slowly she came to her feet and thrusting a shaking hand into the “post box,” drew out the bundle of letters, untied the little cover, and laid her hand on the nearest one, the last. Half timidly, half with a bravado of eagerness, she dropped the other letters to the grass, took the one she was searching for and opened it.

“Dear Robin,—“I have your pilot letter, likewise your extravagant . . .”

Very carefully Laurel replaced the letter in the envelope, and stooping, restored it to the bundle and the bundle eventually to the tree. Then she sat down again and brushed the hair from her forehead, clasped her capable hands around her knees and tried to think. So Robin had the Apple Tree letter, the letter that she had not meant to send him, the letter which told him of her love and her new hope. Her cheeks burned red and then faded ashen-white and her eyes grew dark with shame. Finally she cried, noiselessly, terribly, while the soft pink and white blossoms overhead drifted, unheeded, caressingly to her cheeks.

She would go away . . . she must hide somewhere . . . Robin must never come home. . . . She would never see him again. . . . Her dreams,

she knew, had vanished at the first touch of reality. . . .

Later, she rose and slipped into the house, avoiding Aunt Frances and Elaine, went silently to her room to bathe her eyes. Later, calmer, she played for a time with the thought of cabling Robin at once, that it was a mistake that—

She shook her head. She would wait until his letter came. There was nothing else to do.

Robin's letter came the day Elaine's boy was born. Laurel held the envelope unopened in her hand as she crouched outside that mysterious, closed door and listened, heartsick, to the sounds from within the room. Etienne found her there and dropped down beside her holding the two little, cold, wet hands with his own strong ones clasped comfortingly over them both, and the letter. He was very pale and quiet. They were still there, saying no word, when the nurse opened the door and followed by Aunt Fanny, came out, stumbling over the watchers. With the opening of the door, the little cry they had been hearing for some moments increased in shrillness and volume. Etienne rose, pulling Laurel to her feet.

"My son," he said confidently, and looked eagerly toward the nurse.

She smiled, a tall, dark girl with a Madonna face and incongruous dimples;

"Your son. You may go in now, Mr. De Gabriac."

Etienne vanished swiftly, and Laurel heard the

deep voice of the old doctor, Etienne's reply, and then another voice which she recognized as Elaine's, weak, broken but so content. . . .

She put her arm around her aunt and led her to her own room.

"I wish your uncle were here!" said Aunt Fanny plaintively.

Laurel assured her that he was hurrying as fast as trains would conduct him and gently forced her to lie down and rest for a time. Sitting beside her, listening to her talk of Elaine and the boy, Laurel felt nearer to her aunt than ever before. And she stayed with her, quietly, until Etienne, his eyes dancing and unwonted colour in his dark face, tiptoed elaborately to the door to bid Laurel come out and see her "nephew."

Elaine's baby was a beautiful little atom, if one discounted the wrinkles and the redness. He had a fluff of golden hair, absurd and Kewpie-like, and Elaine was weakly certain that the obstinately closed eyes were brown. Later events proved her right, but for the time being the onlookers could only make wild guesses. Etienne, it seemed, was concerned lest he never "fade" and remain, as he put it, "a throwback to the Red Indian ancestors of my wife."

It was late that night when the household quieted down. Uncle George had arrived, had had his glimpse of his grandson and had made every one miserable for an hour after, prowling around and anxiously asking questions of his wife, Laurel,

the doctor, the nurse and the baby's father. Finally some gifted person lured him from the house and he went proudly through the streets of Stonystream, stopping the merest acquaintances with the information that Adams House had a new member.

So, it was late, too, when Laurel opened Robin's letter. She had never forgotten it for a moment. If it had left her hand since its arrival, it had only been to be tucked away in a safe place, close to her white breast. Now, alone, with the sounds stilled in the house, she drew it forth, a little crumpled, and thoughtfully smoothed out the envelope.

She laid it aside and undressed. In bed, her hair in braids down her back and the nightlight turned on, she broke the seal and read;

"Hotel Savoy,

"April 22nd

"Little darling Laurel:

"I have your sweet, wonderful letter which you so mysteriously tell me was mailed in an apple tree. My dear, I am so very happy. Of course you know I have loved you for so long, but never quite knew I loved you. I only knew you belonged to me, that I was always happy when I was with you, that I missed you wretchedly when I was away from you and that no one in this world could bring me the peace and the gentle gifts you bring me always between your two little hands. I called it friendship, I called it affection, and I called it devotion. I did not think to call it Love until you showed me how.

"I shall always bless you for writing as you did,

bless your generous heart, the big heart and the dear heart. Bless your grey eyes which saw so much more clearly than mine; bless the hand that drew the veil aside for me.

“And now, of course, you have changed all my plans! I had fancied we would stay here through the Summer and Winter, into the Spring, by here meaning everywhere. But now I want to come home to you. I have promised mother this trip for so long I do not entirely wish to give it up. But I have a scheme, a very beautiful scheme. Things at the theatre being such that I am able to remain away, I have decided that, if you will marry me at once, I shall sail as soon as I hear from you, marry you and carry you back here with me and keep you over here until the Spring, a long honeymoon, almost a year, and the beginning of a honeymoon even longer.

“You don’t know how that Dangerfield chap has worried me! And Aunt Samantha! And Jane! And even mother! Every one has combined together in a conspiracy to tell me, indirectly, that you cared for some one else and I was frantic at the thought of losing my little ‘friend.’ I must laugh at myself now, blind idiot that I was. But now you know, and I know, and I love you completely. Cable me, Laurel, darling Laurel, that I may come.

“Your
“ROBIN.”

Her first impulse was one of pure joy. Robin loved her. That was all she knew for many minutes, lying there with the letter under cheek. Robin loved her—*because he knew she loved him*, her

mind added. And on that thought she sat up straight and covered her burning eyes with her hands.

She did not doubt him. But she conceived his love as a thing forced into abnormal bloom. If she had waited, if there had not been that mistake about the letters, the thing would have come about naturally and sweetly, and she would never have felt, as she now felt, that perhaps, perhaps, in Robin's love there would always be a little element of pity and patronage for the girl who had been the first, even unwittingly, to speak.

She could not let him come to her now. Every fibre of her wanted him but she could not let him come. He must have time to think, time to really know his heart. Some things were better waited for.

That was Laurel's white night, sleepless, terrible, half desperately unhappy, half pure rapture. In the morning, after an entranced look at the baby, and Elaine, sleeping, white as a lily, she went to the telegraph office in the dewy green and blue hour before breakfast, found it shut, waited until it opened and she had acquired a headache, and sent her message;

"Please do not come now plan you propose is impossible am writing laurel."

Her letter to him took three days to compose. Finished, it read;

"Robin dear,

"I have your letter and have answered it by cable. I am enclosing in this the letter which should have gone to you by mail. There is no need or wisdom in being anything but frank with you now. I have said I love you, you know it is true, I shall not take back the words. I have loved you so long, Robin, since, I think, the very first day I saw you. And I have been very lonely. I suppose I built up a sort of legend about you, you were the Prince in the Fairy Tale and I the Little Kitchen Maid whom you would never notice. And never did, this being real life and not magic. I knew almost from the first that it would be Elaine. And I was quite reconciled. She was so very beautiful— If I suffered then, it was not wholly suffering. I saw you every day and you were kind to me, and eventually I was able to help you when Elaine stepped out of your fairy tale and chose the stranger prince. After that we were friends and I was content. Because I have always been a foolish little thing, I wrote you many letters and I mailed them in the apple tree in Adams House garden. The last time I did so I blundered and the apple tree post office received the letter that should have gone to you on a great boat and you received the one that never should have been sent. . . .

"You say you love me. I am sure you do. But I did not want you to find it out in quite the way you did.

"I can't marry you, dear. Not now. Perhaps you will think it unworthy of me to deny you, now that the truth is out between us. But I can't help it, Robin. I should always feel that pity played a part with you, should always think that in your

heart you would reproach me for surrendering before siege.

"If you love me, save my little pride. Stay over there with your dear mother until next Spring. And do not write me during that time. I shall not write you—except maybe via the apple tree . . . ! *Do not write me.* Then you will have time to think, apart from the glamour of letters and all the little romances of the pen. If at the end of the year you still want me—and I still love you— Well, we shall see. And meantime, I love you now—and wait—now. Do this for me, Robin! I shall have so much more to give you if you will let me withhold my giving for a time.

"LAUREL."

Of course he answered her, a letter quite desperate in its appeal and frantic in its denial of "pity and patronage" and in conclusion;

"If you won't, you won't, you obstinate little person. To waste a year when so much time has been wasted already! But you know best. I cannot force you, much as I am tempted to take the next boat home. Some day I shall be tempted too far and shall take it. I warn you. I shall love you in a year three hundred and sixty five times more than I love you now. So, perhaps you had better change your mind and take me now—you may be frightened a year hence.

"Promise me—no Dangerfields? And—a letter now and then? You'll write to mother, at least? And I can't quite swear that I shan't write you. And I love you. Sweep all the silly cobwebs from your

brain and when you have done so and nothing prompts you, save your heart, cable me and I shall come.

“Your

“ROBIN.”

But, although she glowed over the letter and laughed and cried, she did not cable. Summer came to Stonystream once again and, with the Summer, Elaine and her ménage were settled in the house. Laurel had the baby to adore and Jane, come to the Inn, to play with, and Aunt Samantha to comfort. And so, waiting, and loving, was happy.

CHAPTER XXIV

CONSULTATIONS

*Have patience, heart, although the road be long;
The night so dark and harbour very far;
Take wings from love, and courage from a song;
And guide your way by one undimming star.*

"Where's Jane?" asked Laurel, meeting a dejected Jerry on the street, early one July morning.

"Don't know," he answered, gloomily, falling in step with her, under the dappled green branches which weave across Maple Avenue. "I've been to the Inn. Mrs. Van Wyck says she went out an hour ago."

Laurel looked at him and laughed a little. It seemed to her that Jerry without Jane was so incomplete a person! It was as if she had met him without a collar. Jane and Jerry were as inseparable as the gold dust twins!

"Come to the house," she said comfortingly, "and stay to lunch. Maybe Elaine will let you play with the baby. He's grown since yesterday and his eyes get bigger and browner every day. Jane will come in before long. I'm sure of that."

But Jane, in earnest consultation with John Wynne in the latter's cabin, had no intention of

“coming in” until the matter which had brought her to Winding River, in the scarlet canoe Robin had bequeathed her, was settled.

They sat, knee to knee, before the stone fireplace. Jane’s unruly hair, long enough to pin up now, was loosened from its confining bits of wire and flopped enchantingly around her earnest face.

“So you are certain,” said John Wynne, smiling, “that Robin loves Laurel and Laurel loves Robin but that it isn’t as simple as it sounds? Young woman, allow me to advise you, never to meddle in Cupid’s pies. You’ll burn your fingers and probably spoil something. It doesn’t pay.”

“I know,” said Miss Van Wyck eagerly running her hands up the sleeves of her new sweater and thereby pulling the loosely knitted green wool wholly out of shape, “I know, but Mr. Wynne, it makes me so MAD!”

Wynne tossed his cigarette into the fireplace and smiled at her.

“What?”

“Everything! There’s Elaine and the baby. Oh, I like Elaine and the baby is a duck and Etienne is my absolute idea of what a man should be and all that—but anyway there they are, lopping all over Adams House, with Laurel waiting on them hand and foot and coddling them and everything. And there’s Robin across the sea—and writing letters—and Laurel won’t answer them. I know. I’ve seen her read them when she thought

I wasn't looking—and nights I've spent with her she cries in her sleep and talks—”

Wynne raised a hand;

“Talks of Robin, we will presume,” he said, “and let it go at that. Poor little Laurel! It isn't fair to convict her out of her own mouth.”

“I wasn't going to *tell*,” announced Jane, wide eyed, “but she talks, you know, a lot of nonsense about pride, and all that. I can't make it out but I think,” said Jane, sinking her voice, “that Robin has proposed and Laurel has refused—I don't know why,” she concluded sadly, “unless it was because he didn't do it sooner!”

“Marvellous, my dear Sherlock, marvellous!” remarked Mr. Wynne gravely. “I have also suspected as much, or something resembling it, in my slower fashion. However, tell me, Jane, just what you think we can do in the matter?”

“You might write Robin to come home!” Jane suggested brilliantly.

“Home to what?”

She didn't quite know and, relinquishing her first thought with a sigh, remarked;

“Well, couldn't you talk to Laurel?”

“About what?”

Jane jumped to her feet, seriously disturbing the slumber of Poilu who had been lying very close to them during the interview.

“You're no help to me at all!” she cried in real indignation. “And I was so sure you would be.”

“Why?” he asked, maddeningly.

Jane dimpled suddenly.

"Playwright," she explained, "you always fix it up in the last act. I thought you'd have a real plot this time."

Wynne laughed, and frowned;

"Oh, Red-Headed Bit of Human Wisdom," he said, "if it were always so easy! If we could direct mortal flesh and blood lives as simply as we direct our pen puppets. No, I am afraid, Jane, you will have to let things take their course."

"I suppose so," said Jane humbly, but there was a spark in her eyes which Wynne did not quite like. That is to say, he liked it well enough, but it worried him, becoming as it was to her.

"You have your kitten-look on," he remarked, "and it bodes no good. Now, Jane," and he was suddenly quite serious, "no meddling with the fate of those two beloved and obstinate young people. If things are as you say, no doubt Laurel has good reason to behave as she is doing. Promise me?"

Jane, dutifully nodding, was busy with thoughts of Jerry. She would take the matter to him. This decided, she shortly afterwards took her departure, and Wynne, watching from the dock, thought he had rarely seen so enchanting a sight as the Flapper at the paddle, although he called out to her that her canoe and her hair, different shades of scarlet, clashed.

Thus, Jerry sitting down to luncheon at Adams House, was presently made aware that his evasive,

elusive lady had arrived, in time to sit down next to him.

When they finally took their departure together, it was to rescue the Blue Demon from the Inn garage and go for a long ride through the sweet smelling sunny country. Once beyond Stonystream, Jane stopped the car and demanded a hearing. She laid the case before Jerry as she had before Wynne—a little more fully perhaps, but still keeping a guard on some of her knowledge, for Jane was both delicate-hearted and loyal.

“And now,” said she dramatically, “what’ll we do?”

“Nothing,” replied her Jerry.

She shook him by the shoulders, until his cap fell off in the road and his brown face was creased and flushed with laughter.

“Irritating creature!” said Jane. “Well, if you won’t do something, *I* will.”

“Why all this anxiety to step in where angels fear to tread . . . ?”

She looked at him and then away again—

“Oh, I love Laurel,” said Jane, “and Robin, too—and I want to see every one happy—I’m so absolutely, bustingly, idiotically, insanely happy myself!” said young, honest Jane.

Jerry held her eyes for a minute, with his own, briefly covered her hand as it lay on the wheel with his own, as briefly said, “good kid,” and, releasing her, alighted in order to recover his cap. When he

clambered in beside her again, the flush was gone from her cheeks and her eyes were clear of the momentary mist which had exquisitely clouded them. Jane was herself again.

Having failed with Jerry and having failed with Wynne, Jane busied herself with sounding out Laurel the next afternoon that they were together. Feeling herself extremely subtle she brought to Adams House a concoction of lace and *crêpe de chine* which she announced her intention of sewing provided Laurel would instruct her. The lesson took place in Laurel's room, and from the garden, through an open window, Elaine's voice drifted to them, talking in French to Susanne, in English to the temporary, trained nurse, and in some tongue which has never been named, but which is the Esperanto of motherhood the world over, to her son.

"How long are Elaine and Etienne staying?" asked Jane, threading a needle.

"Not that needle," said Laurel hastily, "you can't sew *crêpe de chine* with a crowbar. Here, give it to me—Elaine? Oh, until September, I think."

"And your aunt and uncle?"

"Back to New York of course. Adams House is to be closed and put on the market," she replied, without looking up from her task of darning her "men folks' " socks.

"And you?" Jane persisted.

Laurel was conscious of a slight irritation. Why did the child keep harping on a future which

Laurel had no particular mind to face? The feeling passed as swiftly as it had come. To be vexed with Jane was a difficult thing to accomplish; to stay vexed was an impossibility.

Laurel looked up, straight into the eager, green eyes and smiled affectionately;

"Oh, back to Aunt Samantha's, I suppose. And I'll keep an eye on Adams House. Uncle George tells me I'm to be his agent. He says I love the house so much I'd be better able to sell it than any one else. So I'm to show people around and everything."

"I hope you take the commission," remarked her companion, practically.

Laurel laughed. "Of course."

Conversation languished a little as Jane sewed her finger to the material and made certain profane sounds, such as women do. Then;

"When will Robin be back?" she guilelessly inquired, with the offended member in her mouth.

"In the Spring, I think," Laurel replied, indifferently.

"Only her ears got red," thought Jane. "But that's enough to go on."

"When you write to him," she suggested aloud, "you might tell him that I got reckless the other day and took Convention over to Mr. Wynne's to call on Poilu—"

"What happened?" asked Laurel with real interest.

"Nothing. Poilu thought she was a toy and

started to play with her. She nipped him on the leg and barked at him for half an hour after which he apparently considered it beneath his dignity to remain in the room with a shrew, and left. 'Retreated in good order,' Mr. Wynne said."

Laurel laughed.

"Why didn't you take me, too?" she asked and added, thoughtfully, "I must go over and see Mr. Wynne. I wish he would come here to dinner while Elaine and Etienne are here, but I don't suppose I could persuade him."

Here Jane saw an opening, which might not been visible to any other human eye.

"Perhaps," she said carefully, squinting at her laborious work—Jane loathed sewing and knew very little more about it than that it was accomplished by means of a needle and a thread—"perhaps he wouldn't just care to meet Elaine—he's *very* fond of Robin, you know!"

"But that's nonsense," exclaimed Laurel indignantly. "If Robin has recovered, why should his friends hold the grudge?"

Jane smiled wickedly to herself.

"Oh! So he has recovered!" she remarked in obvious surprise, making round eyes for Laurel's benefit.

The little barometer ears were scarlet again, and the contagious tint spread to neck and face. Laurel, furious at herself for the tell-tale blood, flushed rosier than ever as is the habit of people afflicted with a skin sensitive to the emotions.

"I suppose so," she said rather crossly, "it's been a long time."

"Oh, yes, a little over a year," answered Jane, carelessly.

But her carelessness was overdone. Dimples pointed the moral in her cheeks and her pretty mouth was curved in a vain effort to hold back the laughter. To Laurel she looked like a second Puck. "Every red hair on the child's head bristles with wisdom," she told herself, half angrily, half in amusement.

"Look here," said Laurel, putting down the sock and taking the camouflage sewing from Jane's hand, "it's not like you—"

"What?" asked Jane innocently, sinking down in the wicker chair until she rested on the end of her spine and twining her long slim legs around Laurel's chair, "what isn't like me?"

"You know. All these demure questions. And the sewing. Out with it! What are you driving at?"

Jane uncoiled her legs, slipped suddenly to the floor and laid her curly head in Laurel's lap. Her voice when it came was muffled.

"You—and Robin—" she said incoherently. "Oh, Laurel, dear! Why won't you let him come home?"

Laurel stiffened and then slipped her hand, not too gently, under the pointed chin and raised Jane's face until their eyes encountered. Her own were angry, Jane's pleading.

"What do you mean?" she asked, but in her heart the question ran, "*what do you know?*"

Then Jane, who was not built for a conspirator, told her what she knew. It wasn't much, just observations and random guesses and a fabric of conjecture, built about a few words that restless Laurel's traitor tongue had betrayed in her sleep. . . .

Laurel got to her feet, and pulled Jane to hers.

"Oh, you silly, romantic baby!" she said half laughing. "Just because I talk in my sleep? And because Robin writes to me?"

But Jane, silent, faced her defiantly. "I dare you to lie to me!" said the green eyes.

Laurel didn't lie. She wouldn't hurt her love that way. She looked away for a moment and back again;

"You wouldn't understand," she said slowly, "and I can't tell you. But even if you are right, there are reasons why, as you say, I can't let Robin come home—just now. Leave it at that, little Jane. Please—if you love me."

The younger girl, catching her in a strong clasp of strenuous young arms, murmured, "but I do, Laurel, you know I do. Forgive me."

"There," said Laurel. "I hear Jerry's whistle under the window. Run along. You'll probably find him playing with the baby. I'll join you, presently."

But when Jane had gone, absolved and happy,

and half daring to suspect that her prying had, perhaps, helped Robin's cause, Laurel went to her bureau and took from it Robin's last letter. He was taking a walking trip in Sicily when he wrote and his mother was with friends in Rome.

"I came," wrote Robin, "this morning upon the ruin of an old monastery high up in the hills. It had rained a little and the olive trees were grey and green in the mist. The door of the building still stands, Laurel, and over the arch were Latin letters, half defaced. I'm not much of a scholar, but I could make them out. They run this way, '*I am a voice crying in the wilderness. Hurry, hurry, hurry—for time is fleet.*'—Ah, Laurel, must I hurry? No—*may* I hurry? I feel like taking the first boat back—back to you—whether you will, or no. Not a line since I wrote you from London. Not one little line. All my news of you comes through mother. Laurel—how long must I stay away to prove to you that I want to come?"

She put the letter away and went to her desk; drew a sheet of paper out, poised a pen above the ink, waited . . .

No . . . not yet. How could she be sure? And as Jane had reminded her, it was only a little over a year ago when Elaine had been all his world. She would not have him less faithful than she herself. Laurel rose from the desk and closed the rosewood top. . . . Let him wait a little longer . . . and without hope, as she had waited. She won-

dered a little as she went down to Elaine and the baby, to Jerry and Jane, and to Etienne, coming buoyantly up the front path, if she were keeping Robin waiting through pride alone—or through the little feline, feminine instinct to “pay him back.”

CHAPTER XXV

SURRENDER

*Home and the journey ended! Here, the scent
Of old delights is sharp upon the air.
Old dreams, old hopes, old memories are blent
To some new perfume, delicate and rare.*

The rest of that Summer seemed to Laurel merely a preparation for September. And when September came, of course, it found her unprepared. She had to bid goodbye to Elaine again, and to Etienne, and to the baby, now at the most cuddlesome and delightful age; had to see well loved furniture disappear from Adams House, had to wish Jerry well on his return to college—for Jerry, who was “slightly conditioned,” as Jane put it, left Stonystream earlier than usual to work off his conditions before college entrance. And of course Jane went, too, not long after Jerry. Finally, it was over; Laurel had been to town, had seen Elaine’s boat sail, had helped to settle Aunt Frances once more in the apartment. And now she was back at Aunt Samantha’s, once again, taking over the actual business of the still flourishing Blue Moon. And she was very lonely.

During that Fall and early Winter she grew very

near to John Wynne. He was still in Winding River but he came often to Stonystream. Between him and Aunt Samantha a curious friendship, rooted in mutual esteem, had sprung up and it was to Mr. Wynne that Aunt Samantha went in her anxiety for Laurel.

The interview took place at Mrs. Holsapple's one snowy blowy afternoon after Christmas. Laurel had been in New York for the festivities this year and had just returned.

"I don't like it," confessed Aunt Samantha. "The child's losing all her pretty color and getting dark under the eyes. It isn't the Dangerfield boy—heaven knows he keeps poor old Sam, the postman, busy enough—it's something else. *Someone* else. And you and me both know who!"

Aunt Samantha was never grammatical in her earnest moments. Mr. Wynne, joining the tips of his fingers, looked at her over them, thoughtfully.

"Jane consulted me this Summer," he said, smiling reminiscently, "and I am forced to tell you what I told her. We can't interfere, Mrs. Holsapple."

"I suppose not." She sighed gustily for a moment and then said, "it comes from being a born cook, I suppose. I can't bear to see anybody going about spoiling a good recipe through sheer mortal ignorance, without I want to mix in and set things. But I guess you're right."

A few days later, Laurel, taking her solitary constitutional, met Poilu on a hill. That is to say, Poilu met her, with all four feet, and Laurel and

the dog went down into one confused heap in the snow. Mr. Wynne, following his charge more sedately, picked her up and brushed her off, while the dog made frantic circles around them both, barking in wild appreciation of his own delicate jest.

Eventually, when Poilu had become a little more dignified, the three of them started off together.

"Why," said Wynne, looking around him in surprise, "here are the very woods in which we first met. Do you remember?"

She remembered, and told him so;

"And are you sorry you did not take my advice?"

"About my voice?"

Wynne nodded as they walked through the little path, almost knee deep in white from the early heavy storm, their boots making no sound, muffled in the snow.

Laurel was thoughtful.

"Sometimes. But it doesn't last. No, honestly and truly, I am never really sorry."

"And why," he probed gently, "why didn't you? Was it conviction, or pride, that held you back from asking people to help you?"

"A little of both, I think," said Laurel, laughing. "Conviction, yes. I don't think I would ever be temperamentally capable of following a 'career.' Pride,—well, perhaps."

"There isn't any 'perhaps'," he contradicted her, smiling. "It's 'yes' to that, too. I haven't known you all this time without realizing what a proud,

little thing you are underneath. There are some instances though," he added, "when the proudest thing to do is to forget pride; when humility is pride, in a way."

Laurel's heart missed a beat. That he was not speaking of her voice, she well knew.

"Did Robin ever tell you—about me. Of course he didn't," he added, as quickly as she shook her head. "Robin wouldn't. Let me tell you my story, Laurel, such a commonplace little story—and see what you make out of it."

So he told her walking through the wet, white woods, of the marriage that had seemed more than marriage, and of the weakness that had wrecked it.

"There was pride if you like," he finished. "The woman's pride that couldn't bear failure or disgrace; her pride in me that cried out when it was humbled to the dust; my own pride that forbade me to go back and plead with her—and her pride that has kept this silence all the years."

Laurel's eyes were wet and her voice shook, as she slipped her hand into the big hand and held hard to it;

"Oh," she cried pitifully, "what a waste of love!"

Wynne turned on her sharply;

"That's it, Laurel, You've hit it! Just a waste. I hear of her sometimes, indirectly. She's—content—apparently. And sometimes I wonder if she thinks of me. . . ."

"She must," said Laurel, "every day. Don't you suppose she's learned her lesson of tolerance

and loving kindness? Don't you suppose she wouldn't have done it a million times all over again, if she had the power to turn back the clock—and done it differently? Oh, I'm sure of that! She must be wracked and haunted, poor thing!”

“Perhaps,” said Wynne, “and would you think me very weak, Laurel, when I tell you that that very possibility has haunted me all these years? I don't want her to be unhappy, Laurel. Not *ever*.”

“Maybe,” said Laurel, with shining eyes, “maybe it will all come right sometime, John Wynne.”

He laughed a little and clasped the small hand closer ;

“Never in this life, dear Laurel. Beyond—God knows. And God alone. Some things are broken far beyond repair. No amount of patching up can help. I must go on alone to the end. And she—she has gone alone, too. Perhaps there is a special Heaven somewhere wherein we are allowed to mend the dreams we shattered. I sometimes think my long exile here has been a school to teach me how to mend—and how to safeguard.”

They were silent for a moment. Then Wynne turned to her, stood still for a moment in a clear space and took her by the shoulders.

“Such a sturdy little person,” he said, “and such a comfort. You and Robin—and, yes, Jane. You have brought me so much affection, understanding, youth—and brought me, too, contact with the world. I am very grateful to you children! Laurel, I must be just a little cruel with you. I have

had a letter from Robin. Not the first. He is very unhappy, Robin is. Will you let him stay unhappy—because of pride?”

Her face burned, but she met his eyes bravely;

“I—think not,” said Laurel humbly, “but I’m not sure. I can’t be sure of anything. I know he didn’t tell you—but I shall. He—Robin—he found out I cared for him—quite by accident—and—and—then he thought he cared back! How do I know he would have spoken, if he hadn’t found that out first,” asked Laurel in honest terror. “I couldn’t ever be sure . . . perhaps he was just sorry for me?”

Wynne gave her a little shake;

“What reasoning! Is it like Robin to offer his heart out of sympathy? You know it isn’t. If he were ‘just sorry,’ Laurel, he’d write you a graceful, regretful little note and take himself out of your life forever.”

“But he’s so used to me,” she said, frowning, “and I’m a habit—sort of—perhaps.”

“Oh, perhaps—*perhaps!*—perhaps the world will end to-morrow! Why not take your chance, Laurel? Isn’t it worth it? I think our Robin’s vision was just a little clouded for a while. He needed glasses! And you furnished him the glasses and he saw aright! Isn’t that answer enough for you? Hasn’t he gone on caring even without a word or a sign from you? I know, because he told me so.”

Laurel was silent.

“Promise me,” said Wynne, “that at least you’ll

write. I'd hate to think of Robin stewing and fretting over there, almost ill because some little half portion, watch charm of a girl is too obstinate to say '*Come home!*'

Laurel went white.

"Ill? Ill? And you never told me? What have you heard? Tell me, oh, please tell me—"

"Oh, ridiculous creature! I said I would hate to think of him in such a sad case. No, I haven't heard. Heavens, child you're as white as the snow. No, not a line of bad news. He was perfectly fit and rather petulant, when his last letter came, judging by the tone of it. There. Don't promise if you honestly cannot. Run with Poilu and get your color back and I'll follow. Only—don't forget, Laurel."

She did not forget. When Dick Dangerfield descended suddenly upon the Holsapple ménage, she was still remembering.

Dick wasn't expected but Aunt Samantha welcomed him with a sigh of relief. Here was someone to coax back Laurel's dimples and make her laughter sound sweetly in the gloomy old house. Her greeting of him, Laurel not being present, was dangerously ambiguous.

"Well, I swan to goodness if I'm not glad to see you! Did you meet Laurel on the road? No? Well, she's off somewhere, tramping. I declare, the sight of you will do her all the good in the world. I think she's just been pining for young company."

Who could blame Dick for feeling that he had sufficient encouragement to go on right at the start? And Laurel's greeting was hardly less cordial. She was growing a little tired of her problem, was Laurel, and was glad to put it into the background for a few short hours and be herself again.

Dick stayed two days. On the last night he was there, Aunt Samantha wheezed and puffed herself up to bed and left them in the study, once Jerry's sick room, with the red lamp turned low and the coal fire snapping in the grate.

"Oh, Laurel!" said Dick.

He was young; he was very much in love; he had not seen his lady for months and she was kind to him, seemed kind, at all events, after months of indifferent little letters. Dick, too, was a great perhaps-er. Now—perhaps—?

He took her suddenly into his arms and kissed her hotly;

"Haven't you learned yet," he murmured against her cheek, "that you must love me sometime?"

She had only an instant in which to learn anything. But what she learned was not the lesson Dick had hoped to teach her.

Somehow she struggled away from him, her hair a little rumpled, her cheeks blazing;

"No," said Laurel, thoroughly angry—and only a woman knows why, for not three minutes before, she had been feeling very tender toward Dick, and

rather pitiful—, “no, I haven’t learned and never shall.”

He knew finality when he heard it, but he argued with her for half an hour, refusing to admit that he knew it. When they finally parted for the night;

“I won’t come back again!” threatened Dick. “This is the last time. You’ve kept me dangling, blow-hot, blow-cold, quite long enough!”

Because he was angry now, Laurel suddenly turned sorry;

“Oh, Dick—forgive me,” she said, very sincerely, “I didn’t mean to. You knew I liked you—you were such a friend—”

“*Never!*” said Dick, austere.

“And I loved seeing you—,” she hurried on, “—but—,” and Laurel made the plunge, “—but Dick, I’m going to be married.”

“Hood?”

“Robin,” she nodded.

Dick stood for a moment by the heavy old newel post at the foot of the stairs looking up at her as she stood a step or two above him. This was defeat.

Her hand lay on the newel post, so small a hand to hurt a man so much. He touched his lips to it and then straightened up.

“I’m glad for you,” said Dick, “—it’s—may the best man win! Well, that’s over, Laurel. I’m sorry I spoke to you as I did. You’ve been

straight with me always. I didn't mean what I said. Goodbye and God bless you."

He turned and went into the spare room downstairs, that was kept for chance visitors and Laurel went up to her room. She was sorry for Dick. She knew she would never see him again. He would leave early, on the first morning train, and it would carry him out of her life. But she had so little room for sorrow, really. The mischief was done, the secret out, and she had made up her mind.

As she sat at her desk to write the word to Robin, she knew that the touch of another man's lips and another man's possessive arms around her had taught her more than all the months and John Wynne and her own heart had done. She knew now how much she belonged to Robin; how little, after all, pride mattered; it must be Robin or no one. And she would take her chance.

She wrote to him then, swiftly and humbly, such a little incoherent letter, the burden of which was, "oh, Robin, come home."

"I've been so silly," she wrote, "all this time, wondering if you really loved me; wondering if it would last; fearing your pity and your dear sympathetic heart and your 'gentleman's code' which wouldn't let me down! But I know now. Come home, and I will know even better. Come home, and after I have known your arms and your lips and seen your eyes and heard your voice, I will be surer than sure! If, then, you find that you don't

care—but I am painting bogeys—you know I will release you then . . . you are as free as air, now, this very moment. Only come home and see if you really desire the chains. . . .”

But when his cable came, it was to tell her that his mother was ill in Brittany, recovering from a severe attack of influenza. And Robin must wait there and bring her home. There were other things in the cable though, and in the letters which followed, which helped Laurel to wait.

And so it was Spring again, before Robin came home.

CHAPTER XXVI

SPRING

*Wine o' the new moon, bread of young desire,
Blossom time, May time, faery fuel and fire,
Eager arms, strong arms, lips that meet and cling,
Wonder of the green world, love and you and
Spring.*

Spring once more in Stonystream. Robin and Laurel stood in the garden of Adams House and swung their clasped hands like two children, watching the flickering light on the young green trees and the last of the tulips nodding scarlet and golden along the walk.

“Adams House!” said Laurel. “Never to have to leave it! That’s almost the most wonderful thing of all!”

Adams House was theirs, for it was Robin’s wedding gift to Laurel. And the old house would be opened once more for the wedding, which was to be in June. One month off only, thought Laurel, her heart in her throat for happiness. And when they came back from Italy in the Fall, it would be all fresh and shining with new paint for them and refurnished in the colors and textures Laurel loved best. That was to be Mrs. Hood’s

gift to her, and Mrs. Hood would stay with Aunt Samantha during the Summer and see that things were done as she wished them to be.

"Almost? And what is the very most 'wonderful'?" Robin asked her, gaily.

"You."

Robin kissed her swiftly, with never a thought for passerby.

"I've not proposed to you properly," said Robin, "not by word of mouth, I mean. Shall I?"

"No. You said it all without words the day you came up the steps at Aunt Samantha's and I was waiting at the topmost one . . . and if I kissed you first, my Robin, as you have often reminded me, it was because I couldn't help it . . . and because you wanted it . . . and I must always give you everything you want. . . ."

"Oh," said Robin, out of the fullness of his heart, "how beautiful you are!"

"I'm happy," she answered.

"And I."

He drew her to the worn old bench of the swing and sat down beside her with his arms around her.

"And you'll always be happy?" he asked, "always, always? And never regret—?"

"Never! You have all of me, good and bad, black and white. I must give you all I am and all I shall be, whether I wish it or not. And having given, how could I ever regret? It's—just fulfillment," said Laurel.

"So little, so lovely and so wise," he murmured.

"No, you'll never be sorry. You'd never, to quote one of your letters, the surrendering one, and the dearest, 'let me down.' Do you think I have forgotten that distant night when you knelt beside me with your face turned to mine and saw me through a bad half hour?"

Laurel was silent;

"I love you," said Robin.

"Since when?"

"Since the time we went picnicing and you fell asleep. No, since the night you ventured to the house next door to tell me Elaine didn't exist."

"I don't believe you!" said Laurel, frankly. "Robin,—we haven't spoken of it, but tell me, does it hurt now—even a little bit—to think of Elaine? If so, we'll avoid Paris on our way home this Summer."

"No." Robin was serious. "Not any more. It hurt for a long time after I had stopped caring. Pride, I guess. You won't blame me for that?" He laughed softly and added, "do you think there is an ache on earth you couldn't heal with your small hands or an empty place you couldn't more than fill?"

She kissed him, very sweetly, and answered simply;

"No."

Robin was silent, holding her close. Love. But not the first love; the love that was all dreams and moonlight and dew; the love that was half a purer reflection of self. Love; but not the beauty and

the despair of a vision uncaptured and a goal unguessed. This was the mature love, the lasting love, the passion that was soul and body and mind, so interwoven that they could not be separated one from the other. Only Robin knew how much he had given to Elaine, how much of his youth; only Robin knew, out of a bitter knowledge, of the time when he had been high priest at the altar of empty beauty. And only Robin knew how far he had travelled since then.

"Oh, Elaine—" he said, abruptly, "I wanted to serve her on my knees. But you; I want to stand eye to eye with you, hand to hand; and on the good, level ground. That's better."

"And after all," he continued, as the minutes dropped noiselessly into eternity and the Spring sun wheeled in the heavens, "you need never worry."

"Why not?"

"Elaine didn't love me," Robin answered honestly, "and you—"

"And I—?" she prompted him.

"And you, my darling, do!" finished Robin on an exultant note.

Laurel smiled and said nothing. She was thinking; looking ahead. Give and take, take and give; mutual respect; mutual loyalty; the stability of the rock of affection that was theirs; a community of interests; a common understanding; youth and the passion of youth; life and the love of life; and all the years ahead of them.

For Laurel knew what Robin himself did not

know. She knew that he would never forget Elaine. Later, he would come to think of her as a star which had briefly dawned and danced in his sky and as briefly lingered. She was to remain for him, long after the memory of her was an impersonal thing, and as he grew older, the Unknown Goddess, the Fortress Unattained. All this Laurel knew, but she was not jealous, nor was she even regretful. What she had was hers and she was content; for that which was hers was of the stuff of which life itself is made, not stardust and dreams. And Laurel knew that, for Robin, she was as fixed as the morning star and as invincible as sunlight.

She kissed him, and rose to her feet;

"Come," said Laurel, "I must do penance."

They walked through the garden together, brushing wet shining drops from the pale green hedgerows as they passed.

"In connection with— Oh, not Dangerfield, I trust!" said Robin in mock dismay.

"Not Dick," she said and half sighed to remember when last she had seen him.

"Will he be at the wedding?" Robin teased her, "I love—I *dearly* love to gloat. And I gloat well!"

"Robin, how silly! Of course he won't. I mean, I don't suppose he will. And how near the wedding is—I haven't anything ready—you would hurry!"

"You've Jerry for best man and Jane for bridesmaid. And what more do you want? You shall

buy pretties in Paris until there are no more trunks left in the world to carry them. And the loveliest gown of all you shall wear to the Robinhood play-house opening in the Fall. By the way, did Aunt Samantha tell you you will one day be an heiress?"

"Whose?" asked Laurel, amazed.

"Hers. She told me so. 'I've no chick or child,' she said, 'and Laurel will have it all after I'm dead and gone and buried beside my Zeneas!'"

Laurel was between laughter and tears;

"Oh! how could she! I want her to live a hundred years!"

"Of course. As if I couldn't look after you. All the same it was dear of the old thing to think of you. But then, it's easy to think of you, Laurel."

They were by the old tree now. Laurel, on tip-toe raised her face to his;

"Before you ever really knew me," she said, "I had a dream. And in that dream I had a lover; more real to me than even Elaine was to you. And here—" she reached up her hands and thrust them into the post office box, digging down under the wet leaves, "here is the proof. I can be sorry that you learned of my dream before I was willing to tell it to you. Not willing but forced, let us say," she laughed, "but at all events—here are the letters, my last reserve, that was broken into; my last secret that has been a secret no longer, these many months; and my last withholding. And, Robin, now that I have had time to become ac-

customed to it, I'm *not* sorry I loved first. I'm proud that my sight was so much clearer than your own!"

"Give over!" said Robin, commandingly.

She held out her hands to him, wet with the rain that had fallen on the leaves, but warm with life and love and spendthrift of giving; they were the hands which are fashioned for service, hands which endure; they were generous hands and they were Robin's. She put them into his own and between them the package, tied with string, wrapped against the weather in a bit of old mackintosh cloth.

"Here," said Laurel, the lover, "they are all yours."

"So many!" said Robin happily and naïvely, feeling the package.

He kissed her and opened the bundle. And read, for a time, standing, his arm around her in the Spring silence and sunlight, under the budding branches, with the scent of lilacs and violets all around him and the little, dear head against his arm. A breeze came up and whispered to him, and the sunshine danced on the green roof of Adams House.

It was May.

As he folded the last sheet and put the letters, shorn of their wrappings, into his pockets, he tightened his clasp and lifted her face to his. Laurel of Adams House, Laurel of the loyal heart. The apple tree had yielded up its last secret; but what

Robin murmured to Laurel, what words of gratitude, what promise of happiness, what sorrowful sweet and beautiful vows, made in all the passionate wonder and simplicity of fleeting youth, only the apple tree knew.

THE END

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